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EQUESTRIAN PORTRAIT

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CHAPTER I

ROLAND—afterward he was surnamed *The Conqueror*—led a motley horde, men, women and braying asses, through the Blue Gate one fine June afternoon. In the market-place— not so extensive then and wretchedly paved—the townspeople backed before the shaggy, temperamental horses from the north, and when the invaders stopped they stopped too, and waited, wide-eyed, like children before the clown turns his first handspring. They had never seen so many untrained beards, yellow-headed women and naked swords at one time. A northman yawned and at the horrid sight twenty babies began to bawl.

Roland's wife, Jeanne, brown-legged, blonde, clothed in a torn skirt and gold ornaments, said: 'I do not think they expected us.'

Her husband shrugged. 'It looks that way, my love.' He spoke to no one in particular. 'Where is your king's palace?'

Some hundreds of hands pointed up the King's Road. 'Go straight up that street there. Just keep going. You cannot miss it.'

'Is your king at home to-day?'

'The king?'

'You heard me.'

'Yes.'

'Good. Some of you run ahead and tell him that Roland, the Prince of the Northmen, is coming.'

'Oh——'

'Well?'

'He knows.'

‘He does?’

‘Yes. He knew the day before yesterday. There was a crowd of men came from the Crossroads with their swords bent and their noses bleeding——’ Here several of the gossipers’ neighbours elbowed him pointedly. Roland himself betrayed embarrassment. Jeanne said: ‘I told you so.’

‘My dear, who would have thought that we could get so drunk on such dreadful wine? I shall explain everything to this king of theirs and mark my word——’

‘You will probably be arrested. I am glad you did not announce publicly that I am your wife.’

Roland sighed. ‘Stay the fleet heralds; it is Prince Roland and his beautiful consort Princess Jeanne who are calling to-day.’

Their loyal subjects cheered and during the parade up the King’s Road methodically looted each fruit stand as they came to it.

The King of Illyria and the Prince of the Northmen met in the Royal Square not far from the fountain which at that time bubbled in the open space between the park and the walls of the palace gardens. Basil the Third was a fat, middle-aged monarch who looked as comfortable under his crown and canopy as could any man fate had intended should be a baronet interested in nothing but food, horses and his own wife. Beside him, Roland on his moth-eaten charger looked the very god of war.

Now – as Messer Violet’s excellent History informs us – Roland had brought his mob down from their hillsides with no more reprehensible motive than the acquisition of some land which was not three-quarters granite and preferably horizontal. For this land he was prepared to fight or bargain.

But he did not tell this to Basil III. Travel is proverbially broadening and he – all of them – had breathed in something unfamiliar with the dust of the roads. It may be he thought now of the hen-houses they had plundered and the lettuce-growers they had frightened, with a tolerant amusement; certainly without shame. Yet if such peccadillos were pardonable in a hungry man a prince should remember to do things royally.

He swept them with his eyes again, the little King, the cluster of ministers, the sea of heads and the slender towers of the palace beyond the trees. Very thoughtfully he watched a plump cloud slide back of the eastern pinnacle; he could not know that, from the ground, the light of the sky could be seen reflected in his eyes and the sun was glinting off his great, tawny head, and the wind was ruffling his torn shirt. His wild ones were thrusting their beards over his shoulder. From his saddle Roland gazed down at the King, dropped his hand to his sword hilt and said: 'I am a man of peace and never fight unless forced to.'

This information did not visibly cheer Basil III. He looked up, fingering his lips. 'We are in profound sympathy with our noble cousin's love of peace,' he said hollowly.

'He called you a noble cousin,' Jeanne whispered. Roland shook off her hand.

'Our very noble cousin's words fill us with joy,' he answered with unctious. Jeanne glowed.

But neither was a master in the diplomatic art of saying nothing redundantly and thus there was an uncomfortable silence during which Roland sat like a statue, Basil III stared at the ground and the ministers, in a hypnotic trance, watched a northman swallow plums whole.

Basil III cleared his throat. 'In – in the interests of mutual peace we offer you,' says he, 'thirty thousand crowns to leave the city to-morrow.'

Roland drew a long and shuddering breath. Before he could reply Jeanne shook his arm. 'Roland! They are looking at my legs.'

He turned his face to her. 'I told you not to ride astride; and in the city you should wear stockings.'

'Stockings?' Then, more bitterly: 'What stockings?'

Roland spoke in that patient, conciliating manner acquired by husbands of long standing. 'My darling, you know very well—'

'Stockings!' says she.

'And if God is good and you will kindly keep still for half a minute I shall soon be able to swathe you in purple silk.'

She looked at him now. 'Purple silk, Roland?'

He grinned and patted her tanned shoulder. 'You are the light of my life and I love you but there are times – there are times—— So do you say nothing for a while and if anything begins to happen go away from where I am.'

'Now you are talking nonsense.'

Roland forgot her. He stood in his stirrups and looked back at his army, which became noisy at the attention. When he had eased himself into his saddle again Basil III received a leer. The unhappy man retreated instinctively. 'Fif-fifty thousand.'

'No.'

Basil III goggled. Sword in hand Roland clucked to his mare, cried 'Back, Jeanne!' and watched the group under the canopy disintegrate. Behind, the army rippled into movement. As Jeanne reared her horse, screaming, Roland swept up on Basil,

who shrank a little but did not retreat. Roland swayed to the mane of his stamping horse. 'In God's name,' he shouted, 'where is your army?'

On the edge of the Square people were scurrying like dried leaves. Basil III shrugged hopelessly and some contemporary chroniclers - of the popular school - maintain that a tear rolled down each cheek. 'They went out to meet you,' he said.

Roland lifted the circlet from the other's head and placed it on his own. His sword rose into the sunlight but while there was a tremendous amount of noise, cursing and dust, there was no blood shed that day. 'History,' as one of her more inspired acolytes has put it, 'turned a page with a dry finger.'

All that night they waited on the walls, Roland and Jeanne and the rest, while the city slept and Basil rode slowly across the southern plain. It is easy to look into one's heart on a summer night, waiting for dawn. So I like to think that the Roland who strode across the dust the next cool morning toward a completely disgusted militia captain, was a Roland subtly changed. He walked like a king, this Roland.

CHAPTER II

BUT this is not, directly, Roland's story. For his you should consult the monumental *History of Illyria*, written by Messer Violet. On the inexhaustible store contained in his five quartos I have drawn prodigally, as on Messer Leonard's series of biographical monographs. The judicious will find a little-known work called *The Disinherited* worth careful sifting while the more widely known *Illyriana* – I mean such works as Galles' *Illyria*, Orthon Kaas' *Rulers of the Golden City* and the Mallock *Portraits* – are warmly recommended. Marcel Beaudin's short *Roland and After* – in the Carron translation at least – reads like a university thesis and need be noticed only by bibliographers.

Roland – to resume – held the throne for two weeks short of nineteen years, dying of consumption as June opened. The historians unanimously commend the beneficence of his reign – he welded the outlying provinces to the city, something his predecessors had been failing to accomplish for nearly a hundred years – and invariably add that almost his last act was to invite the son of Basil III to return to the city. Jeanne died a year or two later, aged with grief and with only a shred left of that lively vulgarity which had so often shocked the throne room. To the last she refused to wear corsets and to take her son seriously.

This son, Eric, was from all accounts no very distinguished person; even his official biographer is a shade patronising. His portraits apprise posterity

of a short-bearded, preternaturally bald man with large ears and the eyes of a well-fed calf; but physical beauty aside, the magnetic personality who had been his father demanded heroic gifts in a successor to his place as a son. Eric seems to have understood this and to have accepted it tranquilly. There is no record, certainly, of his ever attempting anything half so magnificent as Roland's peace parliament, which began at twilight in a Gold Room bulging with suspicion and excruciating formalities and ended at dawn with every man under the table but Roland. For whatever reasons the opposition, mainly provincial barons with a talent for brigandage and the recollection of obscene stories, respected Roland boundlessly thereafter.

Eric ruled lightly for his allotted time, leaving to his ministers the mass of detail. He kept the Council evenly divided between yellow beards and black (his father's plan), made the customary proclamations on Christmas Day and married twice, his most notable achievement if one excepts the erection of Roland's pillar. This was an equestrian statue rising from the Royal Square where the fountain had been and was conceded to be a work of art. The Square was repaved about the same time, and not long afterward Louis of Basil married a plump young woman from Pelona.

His — Eric's — second marriage was childless but his first wife bore him a son, Peter, who succeeded him at twenty-three. The historians have gone to great pains to misunderstand this hapless young man, for on the day following his coronation he appointed Louis of Basil to be his prime minister and no sane historian has ever been able to discover why.

The elder Basil had returned to the city at

Roland's invitation and had aroused universal admiration by his bearing under circumstances which might readily have become intolerable. Accorded a position second only to that of the reigning house, he conscientiously exercised his privilege of sitting in the King's presence, made an uncommonly dreary speech at the dedication of Roland's pillar and thereafter lived unsensationally. When some youths of his own end of the throne room coagulated into a secret society called *The Disinherited* which achieved a password (Restorance), a tiny badge and several MSS. sealed with black wax, he unimaginatively set their parents and the constables after them. One can spare a grin for martyrs whose god jeers while they bleed.

Lost causes have an undeniable glamour; it is not improbable that a band of patriots, inspired with a holy passion, met to restore the Old Crown while the fruiterers of the King's Road were still moaning. Two generations later a part of the glamour was still there, erupting occasionally into passwords and badges, but no one was primarily a northman or Illyrian, and the distinction was seldom made. There had been comparatively few northmen to begin with; intermarriage produced monsters of cross breeding and the conquerors were gradually absorbed, in the end so perfectly that their descendants spend fortunes on genealogies and almost any librarian with a gift for plausible chicanery and some knowledge of heraldry can order his shirts by the dozen. Peter looked sufficiently regal in a crown and Louis of Basil managed the kingdom with an efficiency acknowledged by everyone except a few retired generals. Briefly, there was no desire for change and no discernible need or likelihood of any.

All this the historians concede, but they point to

the succeeding events and argue that Peter should have foreseen something of the sort. By inference they postulate a practical man with a congenital inability to believe his fellows any better than was profitable, one who might, if pressed, go so far as to admit the post to be Louis's by logic, by his fitness for it, by the total lack of any second choice – yet one who would find someone else. One who felt that even Louis was no more than human and that for such God and the devil had provided temptations enough. One who would have appointed some handsomely-bearded numskull and allowed later historians to die old men. In short, confronted by a Peter who was motivated by common sense, innate honesty and a high sense of honour, the historians blink, make odd noises and exude volumes filled with nonsense.

His own generation appears to have found Peter almost as puzzling though the quality of his statesmanship was never in question. At twenty-three he found himself a king, a widower and the father of an infant son. He had loved his blonde Elise as deeply as is humanly possible at that age and the court wore mourning for a year, after which the ladies of the Royal Square discussed new gowns and Peter with equal, not to say analogous, interest. Such a handsome king, such a robust young widower – why, the possibilities for a woman of reasonable beauty and intelligence were dazzling. Imagine then the stupefaction when he refused to consider any of them either as wife or mistress. I have searched all the memoirs of the period, down to the most scurrilous, and I have found bewilderment, rage, disgust and ridicule; but never any doubt of his sincerity. For six years this monster was as chaste as a nun.

I have sat for hours before his portrait – you will find an engraving of it in Messer Leonard's monograph – and I have always left no wiser than when I came. I advise you to study it. Facing a portrait by Joyell one usually faces a living soul but here one sees only a man, handsome as a lion and vaguely suggestive of an actor furbished in the most regal appointments the warehouses afford. You will search those eyes in vain ; the canvas is dumb, lacking all voice, depth, feeling. Into no other portrait has Joyell introduced so much extraneous matter and to me it seems a highly significant anomaly. These robes, crowns, sceptres, eagles and what-not – do they not appear to be the artist's mute confession of failure ? Is it not as if he were saying : Peter the man I cannot reach ; here is Peter, King of Illyria.

Yet Joyell was a great artist in all the word implies. Could it be, now, I wonder, that he did reach Peter the man and found – nothing ?

I do not know and I propose to make no bones about it. Like the historians I toll old phrases ; Peter, only son of Eric and third northman king of Illyria, is once again born, to grow, to move (woodenly), to die ; neatly, chronologically, from one page to another until the last page. And that is all, I have found, that I can do.

CHAPTER III

ONE thinks of Louis of Basil as a man of fifty, iron-bearded and handsome, just as Elizabeth is – for us – always young and beautiful and Brian remarkably like a bad young poet. It is useless to attempt forgetting the Joyell Gallery; that painter was, I am convinced, the finest historian of them all – he could put an epoch into a canvas four feet square – and I cannot sufficiently admire Messer Leonard's courage in using as frontispieces to his monographs such excellent copies of the portraits.

There are no great men nowadays; we are all equal and all equally nondescript. But in the Gold Room you can come face to face with a great man. Go there; it is not the Gold Room in which you will find yourself but Louis of Basil's own chamber in Four Courts in Pelona. He is seated sideways to a wall of bare white plaster – nothing else could possibly be so evocative of the south – near a square window through which you glimpse Pelona's sunny landscape, drowsy, green and very hot. His dress is the crimson, fur-collared robe of a King's Counsellor and it becomes him. He holds a book bound in vellum in his left hand, the History of Thucydides. His head turned, he contemplates you, you who have traversed a hundred years of time and leagues of space to interrupt his reading. You will not need the small brass plate on the frame or the coat-of-arms which is in the upper right corner of the portrait to advise you here is a prince. The man is princeliness personified, calm, powerful,

formidable. His gaze is not contemptuous but it is not friendly. Why are you here and what is it you want? He waits. If God loves you you will be brief and not stammer much. Outside a June sun is beating down on the tiles and dust of the courtyard; somewhere Francis and Elizabeth and Brian are playing, the only creatures with vitality enough to keep moving in the heat; the afternoon is like a flawless crystal, an afternoon that flamed and cooled how many years ago! But here it is, deathless.

Yes; facing Louis of Basil one is aware of an odd discomfort and inclined to admit at once the impossibility of writing about him in commensurate prose. One should prefer to do no more than put down his name and go on to the next chapter. He was a great man, a son of kings and the begetter of Elizabeth. The historians are still furiously engaged in proving him a scoundrel or a patriot; they will, I trust, go to hell when they die. For the Pelona letters are there for the reading. . . .

Louis married. The first child was a boy, born on the stroke of midnight of the last day of the year. They named him Francis. Eric's gift to the red-faced princeling was a small, gold-hilted sword. He grew through childhood's usual afflictions – here augmented by his sister and Brian – into a thin dark man with coarse hair and a big nose, an Illyrian to his finger-nails. When twenty he was presented to Eric at almost the last court that placid monarch held and not over a month later fought his first duel. With a northman believed to be – it is not certain – the younger son of the Duke of Wallace. Details other than a mention of the little hill outside the East Gate as the meeting-place – it was a favoured battleground – and a note observing naïvely that public honour was satisfied, are unknown.

His sister, born a year and some months after him, was named Elizabeth. As a child she was, if contemporaries are to be believed, unbearably homely and given to grieving that she was not a boy. She cared more for Brian than for her brother and the two of them led Francis a dog's life. But the three were as wild a trio of savages as could be found anywhere and to save his reason Louis of Basil shipped them to Four Courts, his estate in southern Pelona. There they stayed until adolescence came to each and they returned to the house on Vintners Lane one by one. Those were the Pelona years.

Comparing her portraits with those of the only other woman approaching her in beauty – Eleanor of Lucé – one is bound to concede to the princess the ancient adjectives. Tall, cleanly-shaped and browed like a queen, Elizabeth of Basil was assuredly one of the most beautiful women who ever wore flesh. Joyell has seated her, leaning back among many cushions, her dark gown flowing out of the deep shadows at her feet to where her bare arms and shoulders give the portrait life. They are outspread on the cushions – she is leaning back, remember – in a pose too often more comfortable than pretty, but Joyell is the painter and I imagine only an artist can adequately appreciate the art which has made those curving arms a part of the head and shoulders. She has her father's eyes. There are purple gleams in the black hair and an imperious hauteur about the lips and chin which makes one reach instinctively for the hat brim. Her low corsage is edged with pearls and a ruby rides the swell of her breast.

She was always her father's daughter. The gallants who ogled their way through the drawing rooms of the Square found her dark eyes troubling

things, and it fretted them immeasurably. They were unreadable by gentlemen who prided themselves on their talent at just such perusal; when they did become as the printed page the mind gagged and utterly refused to accept their message. It was inconceivable that the woman was laughing at you. . . . So they tripped blithely toward the still flame of her loveliness and they stumbled back, their ears afire.

She had a criminal genius for making amorous males feel cruelly like the monkeys amorous males are, and to her all men came stepping high, the light of the conqueror in the eye and a flower behind the ear. To none of them did it occur, seemingly, to treat with her as he treated with – we will charitably assume – his cook; that is, with simplicity and a head cleared of the more primal instincts. The obvious criticism is that men are, while their health is good, creatures of God and women are not usually interested in palaeontology; to which the equally obvious reply is a shrug. The convention functions splendidly until one meets with – I choose the adjective carefully – a fastidious woman.

Though Brian labelled differently. He said once: ‘Gentlemen, she has neither something the matter with her nor an exaggerated conception of her own value. When the man comes by who is worthy of her she will give him everything such a paragon deserves. Meanwhile you cannot hope for any sort of intimacy with her until you admit that she is more intelligent than the darlings who presently succumb to your charms, more intelligent and level-headed than all of you together and at your best – and act accordingly.’

And though he was perhaps too fond of her for exact impartiality, Brian should know. . . . Francis and Elizabeth were hardly out of diapers when

Louis of Basil came to his wife with a boy of three or so at the end of his arm. The boy's hair was a dark brown, his eyes grey and his demeanour intensely suspicious. Louis said: 'His name is Brian and his mother is dead. I ask you to care for him because he is my son.' His wife answered: 'The nurse is very fond of children, Louis, but I hope there are no more.' He assured her, grimly enough, that there were no more.

So until he was sixteen Brian lived in the square-towered house on Vintners Lane and on the Pelona acres, not unhappily. Then Louis of Basil, now a widower of four years' standing, settled a generous fortune on him and told him he was his own master henceforth. Louis had been to Pelona and come back thoughtful, Brian with him. 'What I have done I have done,' says Louis, 'because long ago your mother told me that she loved me and I believe I loved her. So have I paid tribute to memory and a woman who might have been wiser. . . . Nevertheless matters grow complicated. Elizabeth blushed several times, I noticed, when there was absolutely not a thing to blush about; and it is somehow annoying to be told that you and Francis begin pummelling each other before you are out of bed. Then, from what I hear, Francis has the spirit but lacks, shall I say, the talent. I suppose it would be unreasonable to ask you to exercise a certain amount of Christian forbearance; it was Cain who conquered and lived to beget. Or was Abel married? I must remember to ask Charles. Well,' said Louis, 'you are a not unintelligent boy and you will understand. . . .' Brian, holding himself very stiff, shook his head once or twice to show that he did understand. Louis of Basil rose. 'Now we are quits - and may I have your hand?'

He entered into his manhood early. Louis of Basil got him a dukedom ; as Brian, Duke of Malvern – which had been headless ever since Douglas of Malvern died in the midst of what was to have been at once a sonnet, an acrostic and a pornographic libel on his sister-in-law – he was to be met with in the places proper to the hour. In the best portrait of him, that one by Joyell which depicts him in the black of a tragic poet, he is smiling very faintly with the air of a lover born with a broken heart and bearing up as cynically as could be expected. I take a delight in him ; of all the people who move across the pages of Messer Violet's third volume he is the only one who acts sensibly. The word is, I believe, his own. I envy him his sardonic good looks, his skill on a flageolet and his guardian angel ; while the fact that he was Eleanor of Luce's lover wrings from me seven bleats every time I think of it.

CHAPTER IV

FOR one may admire or dislike Messer Violet's other characters impersonally, as creatures whose flesh is paper and whose blood is ink, but to Eleanor of Lucé one capitulates whole-heartedly, without reserve ; and that one cannot ever meet face to face this pretty and delightful and utterly lovable woman takes on the proportions of a tragedy. There are no women like her nowadays.

But there is nothing at all left of that world which she graced so charmingly. They died a long while ago, those lords and ladies, and they took with them the glow which used to bathe the city at sunset and the laughter that flared with the candle-light ; the world has grown old. The lords and ladies are all dead and it is we who live, we who have never learned how to live gallantly, with grace. Our gentlemen are not men on horseback but taxpayers and husbands, humble vertebrates in the backbone of the nation ; our women are anæmic, unbeautiful and tragically our equals. For we have given hostages to fortune. We have listened to our priests and to our wives and they – supreme evangelists of the sensible, worldly word, hucksters of pottages – have made us believe that life is not a pleasure but a duty. And drearily, computing the net value of each step, each day, we moil toward paradise or a mansion on the Square.

Chin-deep in my own age, a child of it with its mark on me and unswervedly loyal to it, I yet – because the one is life as it must be lived and the

other, just possibly, may be art – cry a valediction to the lovely yesterdays I never knew, to the nights and mornings when living was a glamorous thing. Surely the winters are not so cold, the snow not so white and deep as it was then, the summers not so hot. Is roasted meat so flavourous, wine so heady, now? Who can sing the songs they knew? I heard a horseman cross the Square the other midnight and I wondered if the sound was so very different then, when the horseman might have been Brian of Malvern. The vesper bells still hover above St. John's Place on a May evening but who knows the splendour of God, fears the devil and swears by the saints to-day? Men live meanly and when they die they rot. The wind that stirred the dust of the Pelona road, the blank quietness of a Sunday forenoon in the lanes about the Royal Square, the sun that made the marble of the palace steps hot to the touch, the very sky above – are they really the same?

Never mind. It pleases me to sit here and dream of those days, on this damp and not particularly exhilarating evening – they are predicting, with morbid gusto and citations from natural history, a bad winter. So I pull close the curtains and sit down nearer the fire. . . . Quite irrelevantly I think of a lace handkerchief and a gown cut low at the breast and a face with the liveliest eyes and the ripest mouth in Christendom; of those fans which were made of two ounces of ivory and the carver's eyesight – of long swords and wine glasses and candles gleaming. There is perfume in every woman's hair and their hands are small, tender, beautiful. Somewhere not far off violins are playing; nearer at hand a man is talking in a voice hoarse with wine, steadily, insistently. A hand lifts a filled glass to the light and a man chuckles as a new sound rises, the voice of a

flageolet, dancing, whirling, rising above the song of the violins and from that height sending down a perfect shower of music. A girl laughs and leaning across a table, her bare arms and shoulders reflected in its mahogany, trades a kiss for a rose. Newcomers enter, the women brushing snowflakes from their hair, the men demanding hot, spiced wine. It is still snowing and the wind is colder than ever. . . .

CHAPTER V

BUT when Brian took his leave the snow had stopped falling though an arctic wind still charged heavy-footed across the world. The snow was dry and crisp ; the ground was well covered with it but the rooftops at the foot of the hill held only ragged patches. The sky was black and starless. In the driveway couples were getting into coaches and driving off, their voices and the jingle of harness a cluster of sound in the immense stillness of the night. Brian refused proffers of a lift to his own door and waited, sniffing the sharp clean air, until the last coach had gone; then turned up his collar and stepped into the snow.

He walked down St. Anne's Hill to Elder Place, crossed it and turned up West Lane without meeting a soul. The storm had driven everyone indoors. On either side of him the houses were dark piles of masonry and shuttered windows though here and there a lantern made a circle of light on the snow and found glints in a brass knocker. He lowered his head to the wind that swept down from the Royal Square ; ahead of him a coach door slammed and he looked up in time to see the coach itself roll into the Square and disappear. When he came up to the house it had stood before, he glanced at the door and paused.

A woman in a white fur robe stood there.

She did not appear to be waiting for anyone and she ignored him pointedly for a good half-minute. She stood in the shadow of the entrance, quiet, white, impersonal. He glanced at the iron lantern

above her ; its front was pierced with a coat-of-arms unfamiliar to him. When he looked at the woman again he saw she was eyeing him calmly. The wind had swept the stone steps bare and piled snow in a heap against one end ; there was more snow on the ledges and carvings of the façade and the wind played with this, tearing loose little showers which stung his face viciously. His own breathing seemed loud ; otherwise the stillness was complete.

‘ Why are you waiting here,’ he asked, ‘ and can I be of any use to you ? ’

Only her lips moved, almost imperceptibly ; her voice was low, rich and — he decided — authentic Lucéan. ‘ It was very quiet until you came,’ she drawled, ‘ and no, Messer Brian, I think not. Not to-night.’

‘ You know me, then ? ’

Did she smile ? He could not be sure. ‘ Even if you were not carrying a flageolet under your arm.’

‘ Shall I pipe you to sleep ? It is time you were in bed.’

‘ And you ? What is Irene thinking of to let you roam the streets on a night like this ? ’

‘ Irene ? ’ He humped his shoulders. ‘ Irene is probably dreaming of Beverly.’

‘ Oh.’

‘ You were not there to-night ? ’

‘ No. At Irene’s you mean ? No.’

‘ I would have seen you surely.’ He glanced up at the lantern again, frowning. ‘ Quartered, two feathers, an eagle——’

‘ A wren, Messer Brian.’

‘ Ah — I have you now.’ He stared up at her.

‘ Was it Francis who just rode away ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘For some reason that depresses me. Though Francis,’ he assured her, ‘has his points.’

‘It is no night for gossip in the streets, Messer Brian. The snow is gathering around your ankles and this wind is fiendish. You had better go home.’

He waved a gloved hand at the immensity about them, at the snow and darkness and quiet of the night. ‘Anyone can sleep; I would rather walk alone and wonder why I cannot love Irene to-day as I loved her a year ago.’

She was white and straight in her long furs, lips very dark in this light, sleepy-eyed. There was a line of dark hair between her face and small fur cap; the door that framed her was painted white and there was snow at her feet. She said: ‘You are a year older now than you were twelve months ago, Messer Brian.’

‘Oh. Could that, do you think——’

‘How should I know?’ She shrugged a little. ‘Besides, I also have things to wonder about; and it was very quiet until you came.’

‘Humph! If it is about Francis I advise you to go to bed. He is the same a year or ten years after.’

She turned away from him and he heard the knocker drop once, twice. ‘Good night, Messer Brian.’

‘Where are you dining to-morrow?’

‘At home. Alone.’

‘Good.’

‘I said alone. Good night.’

‘Madame, I wish you sweet dreams – of me. Good night.’

The door closed and he was alone, but her voice and his, intermingled, seemed to linger in the air.

CHAPTER VI

AND at the oddest times thereafter her drawl would re-echo in his brain and his memory of her, of their moment together, surge into a flood that swept him, not unwillingly, back to West Lane; he had only to close his eyes. Once more it was after midnight of a cold, windy night and there was the smell of new snow in the air and he was listening to assuredly the laziest, gentlest voice in the world. She had been aloof loveliness miraculously discovered in a narrow street and she had been, now that he thought of it, amused. What was there so amusing about him? And what on earth had they talked about? He could not remember, yet it seemed to him that they had told each other all manner of things about themselves that no one else knew. Had she said in so many words that Francis was becoming a problem? Then why had he not offered to eliminate Francis, permanently and without ostentation? And what had he told her about Irene that seemed to have crystallised what he felt about Irene so that now he was quite sure they were finished with each other? Nothing so frank, surely, as the figure he evolved for Elizabeth's delectation, on the pavement outside Daniel's bookshop. 'An adult,' he had said, 'cannot be expected to spend all his time in bed, in a bedroom. There are other rooms.'

He still liked it even though it was not scrupulously fair to Irene. But Elizabeth had only sniffed and informed him that he made her tired and that all men were alike, which two not very extraordinary

assertions he brushed aside with a wave of her book, casually. 'You forget that I am a year older now.'

Elizabeth looked at him for a moment and then at something farther down the lane. She may have shrugged. 'Well, but so is she.'

He could not think of an appropriate answer to that, regretted the point had not occurred to him in West Lane and turned the pages of the book Daniel had just sold her, a small Ovid embellished with portraits of all the gods and goddesses and tiny vignettes which repaid careful scrutiny. 'Though I did think,' he said slowly, 'that this would last. She seemed to be exactly what I wanted.' He added: 'She was what I wanted.'

Elizabeth murmured: 'You may as well be honest.'

'Yes.' He closed the book. 'But I suppose I was wrong; or being a year older does change things. Mind, there was, there is, no trouble. It is simply that something has been lost. And neither of us care very much. You can see how bad it is.' His voice died.

The winter afternoon was growing old and it had become, suddenly, very still. All movement was now deliberate, unhurried; people brushed past them ever so slowly, it seemed, and without a sound; the shouting of some children down the lane had a peculiar distant quality in it. Elizabeth's profile was like a cameo against her dark furs. Their voices were low, their bearing melancholy as they pondered the mystery and profundity of existence, on Daniel's sidewalk in a hushed, December twilight.

'And there is no other woman?'

'I do not think so.'

She turned. Her coach had been waiting and now they crossed the pavement to it. The snow was piled

in soiled lumps against the curb. 'You had better marry the next one, Brian,' she says, and melted into the darkness within the coach, all but the pale oval of her face. He leaned against the open door. 'Maybe I will.'

She said, Yes, she was going to the cathedral with Louis. By a superhuman effort Brian forbore asking about Francis's probable companion, gave Elizabeth her book and shut the door. The coach moved off; across the street a lamplighter set his ladder against Duke Eric's garden wall and when he took it away daylight was gone. The lantern's flame was brighter than the sky; dusk filled the lane and it was a clear, frosty Christmas Eve.

Brian closed the door of his own house on it and went upstairs to bathe and dress; everything he put on he wore for the first time except his sword. He had dinner at home and then rode in his coach to Irene's. She was still dressing. Once he would have made a pleasant nuisance of himself trying to help; now he remained in the drawing room and picked a melody out of the piano with two fingers. When Irene came down he kissed her, praised her gown and did not say anything more until the windows of the cathedral appeared like great pointed jewels on the other side of St. John's Place. He said then that he liked to attend high mass at midnight. Irene said she did too.

Peter and his son arrived a second before them and as they mounted the icy steps they could hear the boy denying that he was at all sleepy or cold. Above them the twin spires soared to an unimaginable height into a very frigid heaven; the tall doors, sculptured with the figures of the Passion, were open and just within them the eternal light flickered in mid-air; beyond was a sort of foggy dimness flecked

with candle flames. Brian took off his hat and put it under his arm, carefully because it was new ; for a moment the wind tangled his hair with cold fingers – then he was walking down the nave, breathing scented air, in the rising murmur that followed Peter and his son like the wake of a ship.

Louis, whose pew Brian shared, was already seated with Elizabeth but Francis was not in sight. He appeared just as the service was beginning and took a pew across the aisle and ahead of Brian. A vision in white fur settled down beside him. So Brian saw her again, and if Irene noticed that he appeared to see nothing else she did not mention it.

High mass was being served in celebration of the birth of the Son of God. Outside, under a midnight sky, the quiet of the holiest of nights lay upon the earth ; here, within, a thousand candles flamed and wavered everywhere, but thickest beyond the enormously heavy altar rail where they blazed on gold lace and jewels and precious metal ; incense swirled in heavier clouds as the Cardinal chanted and the choir echoed him, melodiously ; Brian knelt and rose, bowed his head and lifted it and all-in-all decided that Eleanor of Lucé was the most adorable worshipper a god ever had. He could see only one cheek but that cheek was perfection itself ; the way her furs flowed from her humbled shoulders made him think of the Virgin in her star-studded robe, and the way she knelt and clasped her hands made him want to start on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

So when the Cardinal lifted his plump hands and everyone rose ; when the bells in the towers began to send their deep melody ringing across the city ; when the organ began to thunder in the upper reaches of the cathedral and a thousand voices burst into a song that made the very saints and gargoyles

dance – then Brian lifted up his face and bellowed, at the top of his voice, with tears in his eyes, not the glory of the coming of the Lord but the birth of love.

Later, as they were going out, he caught her eye and nodded. She nodded back gravely ; Francis was looking elsewhere at the time. Brian did not see her again until New Year's Eve ; meanwhile one early breakfast at the White Star on a morning – the second after Christmas – when Francis was not present, furnished him with a few facts about her and several ribald anecdotes about her late husband, who had been elderly and diabetic. Brian could not recall him and did not try ; and refrained from asking too many questions. But he did stare fascinated at the only two men present who had been at the dinner she gave when she opened her house on West Lane after two years of mourning on the ancestral estates in Lucé. They found nothing remarkable about her – except her hair, which so far Brian had not seen – and to Brian even second-cousinship failed to explain such complete brutification.

CHAPTER VII

THEN on New Year's Eve Peter – this was the custom – gave a grand ball ; at this ball he danced four times with Elizabeth – radiant in a white satin gown – while Brian danced five times with Eleanor of Lucé and only thrice with Irene, who did not immediately say anything. At two o'clock His Majesty bade them all good night and a number of the more elderly notables left also ; the musicians were thereupon instructed to play lighter, quicker melodies and Brian, a glass of excellent punch under his belt, unceremoniously brushed aside a cluster of her courtiers and swung Elizabeth out on the floor.

She seemed extraordinarily happy and danced like a nymph. ' You should have asked first,' she says. ' Peter asks beautifully.'

' Because Peter risks refusal. Or has he improved since last year ?'

Elizabeth shook her head sadly. ' Not a bit.'

' You should get Louis to take up the matter with him. " Sire, your dancing is nothing short of a national scandal. What are we coming to when a mere Duke of Malvern is by everyone acclaimed the first stepper of his time ?"'

' He says he enjoys it but he lies. Really, he should not dance. One does not expect it of him and when he tries the spectacle is embarrassing.'

' Is it ?'

' When he stumbles he blushes like a boy.'

' Peter needs a wife to tell him wherein he fails to be very regal.' Brian executed an elaborate figure,

glided skilfully between two couples who a second later charged into each other with a dreadful crash and over Elizabeth's shoulder noted without any acute emotion that the chief casualties were Irene and Beverly. The poet appeared dazed.

'What was that?' Elizabeth asked. Brian chuckled. 'Beverly can dance well when his mouth is shut but he is dancing with Irene, who cannot. I must warn her; if she ever asks him to recite some of his poetry he will break a leg.'

'So his heart remain whole.' She eyed him. 'Though you seem to be managing.'

'Brian always manages.'

Elizabeth shrugged delicately. 'Have you buried your dead, you two?'

It seemed to him, glancing up, that it was the walls which were moving slowly and they who were still. The dancers revolved like a cosmos. 'There are dead, aren't there — such a lot of them when love dies. No, not yet.'

'Yōu had better attend to that then — first.'

The music stopped and they walked to an alcove under the musicians' balcony, a low-ceilinged, white-and-gold alcove with a seat upholstered in purple. Brian said, when they were seated: 'Eleanor understands. Besides, she is not his mistress.'

'It is not so simple as that. He was talking of marrying her.'

'Upon my word the man stops at nothing.' From the buffet table two alcoves away came the voices of mellowed gentlemen singing 'Danaë.' 'But it—— Humph! Do you think that is what she sees in him? Are widows so obsessed by marriage?'

'She would make you an excellent wife.'

'What woman would not? But I want to be loved for myself alone.'

Elizabeth smoothed the lap of the marvellous gown. 'He met her on his trip south last spring and nearly killed himself carrying tons of flowers to her husband's grave. I think he loves her.'

'But she does not love him. I know that.'

'You really want her?'

'Do you doubt it?'

'And if she refuses you?'

'My heart will not break.'

'No?'

'Why do you say no in that way?'

'I presumed you loved her.'

'I do. You do not understand. If she were cool to me — which, praise heaven, she is not——'

'Everyone was staring at you. There was not a better way of telling the city you and Irene have parted. But what Francis has been doing I cannot imagine.'

'Francis is still celebrating his twenty-seventh birthday at the wine table. But you interrupted me.'

'What were you saying?'

'I was about to explain why my heart would not break.'

'Well, why not?'

'I never thought of it before but that is certainly it. If a woman becomes cool to me — you understand? — why, whatever liking I may have for her goes away immediately. How can I love a woman who has not the elementary discernment to appreciate a Brian? It is obviously impossible.'

'Obviously.' Elizabeth's lip curled into a commiserating smile. 'Some day, Brian, you will find yourself loving a woman who appreciates you only too well; and your world will be a dreary place for a while.'

'I think I know what you mean.' He shrugged.

‘Such a woman I do not ever expect to meet ; but if I do I imagine the stake will be less my heart’s ease than my immortal soul’s. A love that strips you of self-consciousness and humour and pride is best left alone.’ The music had begun again, very slow, and past the alcove couples drifted by arm in arm with a continuous rustle of skirts and tinkle of spurs. Above them the ceiling began to tremble with the thumps of twenty musicians keeping time with their boots. ‘I take love as I take all things – sensibly. Do you want to dance?’

‘I want to know what you expect Francis to be doing while you play around with Eleanor.’

‘Oh, Francis——’ He waved a hand. ‘Who cares?’

Her eyes were troubled. ‘Louis will not like it.’

‘Louis will understand. I will explain to him: Here is Eleanor whom I love and who loves me and here is Francis whom we do not want around.’

‘Really,’ says Louis, ‘nothing could be simpler. Go on.’

They looked up. Louis, his hat on and Elizabeth’s cloak of silver fur over one arm, was staring at them with gravely quiet eyes. Brian rose. ‘You are leaving already, Highness?’

Louis was as punctilious. ‘I am, Your Grace, after you have made things still simpler.’

Elizabeth said: ‘He and Francis will be quarrelling again.’

‘The black-haired woman?’

‘Lucé’s widow – yes.’

‘And Irene? But why ask. So you have finished with each other? I am sorry. You were the best-matched pair in the city. Now I shall have two separate trouble-makers to watch.’

Brian grumbled: 'Three, Louis; you are forgetting Francis.'

'All of you will finish in hell,' Louis says placidly. He draped her cloak over Elizabeth's shoulders. 'After I am dead you may fly at each other's throats as often as you please; meanwhile I dislike having my old age made a burden to me and if necessary I shall have the black-haired woman - who otherwise seems quite ordinary to me - abducted.'

Elizabeth protested: 'It is not her fault, Louis. And she is a beautiful creature.'

'My dear, I am not dispensing justice.'

Brian says slowly: 'But surely Eleanor has a word to say and I ask you fairly, Louis - but no. No, it would not become me. In fine,' said Brian a shade more lucidly, 'I am going to dance one more dance with Eleanor to-night.'

Louis asked him to hold the pose. Elizabeth rubbed her cheek against fur. 'Let him dance, Louis.'

'And when they quarrel?'

She says, very drily: 'Why, then we will salve and bandage Francis and abduct the woman.'

Louis smiled unhumorously. He eyed Brian and his lips twisted again. 'My children! whom I have from God.'

Brian stirred. 'I can imagine how you feel.'

'You are very sympathetic,' Louis snapped the brim of his hat farther down over his eyes and thrust fists into pockets. For a second or two his beard was still. Then: 'Well, go your own way. You have always gone alone.'

'Yes. I like to.'

'That should make it easier.'

'Yes.'

'Good night.'

Elizabeth gave him her hand to kiss and then she and Louis left. And not a long while afterward Francis abandoned the wine table and swaggered out into the middle of the floor where Brian was dancing, once more, with Eleanor.

Roundabout people slowed in their dancing to watch. Out of the corners of his eyes Brian saw Irene draped in Beverly's arms and Lady Praen watching across a plump shoulder and the wide, expectant grins of three or four gentlemen who liked a good joke. And Brian felt his ears grow red and suffered agony wondering if Eleanor could handle herself at a moment like this as – above any woman alive – could Irene.

This was a woman's business even though it could be made – untidily – a man's. 'Messer,' she says calmly, 'I own that it is getting late ; and that you are unpardonably rude.'

Francis grinned. 'As to that we will not argue here. You gave me all evening but even so I could not think of a more genteel criticism of your taste in dancing partners.'

'Tastes,' says Brian, 'differ amazingly and there is no accounting for them. Go away, Francis, and stop annoying people.'

Eleanor's lifted chin stopped Francis's reply and for that moment Brian almost pitied the man for what he must be seeing in Eleanor's eyes. 'If you will get my wraps I will go with you,' she says.

Francis bowed and offered her his arm. She refused it in a manner that choked Brian with admiration. 'His Grace is waiting for me ; you will surely excuse us until the music stops.' She turned and Brian swept her away before Francis could utter a word. Someone in the crowd – Brian suspected Eric, whose tastes were low – applauded

with cupped hands, a derisive-sounding tribute Brian ignored.

Eleanor's cheeks were flushed. 'Your arm — you are hurting me.'

'I deny it.'

'And people are looking.'

'So am I. Why have I never cultivated fiddlers? Francis would hear music until dawn.'

'Irene is staring too.'

Her eyes were very little below the level of his. 'Is she?'

'You are not fair to me or her, Brian, especially to me.'

His lips drooped unaccountably. 'But it is all over, Eleanor.'

'You do not love her any more?'

'And she does not love me. Does that make you happy?'

'No. You loved each other once — and it is always sad to see love die.'

'My dearest dear, who taught you all you know?'

'Why——' and her lashes swept up, 'you have, I think.'

The soul of him knelt before her.

They were playing an old song . . .

*O Western Wind, when wilt Thou blow,
That the Small Rain down can rain——*

'So to-night,' Brian was mumbling, 'Irene and I bury our dead, as Elizabeth says. And you will deal equitably and finally with Francis. And then to-morrow or maybe the day after I shall come to you to tell you that I love you, heart of my heart.'

The music stopped raggedly. Brian walked by

Eleanor's side across an acre of waxed floor to the doors where Francis was waiting. That gentleman nodded curtly to Brian and led Eleanor away. Brian watched them until they had disappeared down the great stairs but Eleanor did not look back. He turned. Irene, waving Beverly off, was coming toward him.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN he left Irene he rode across a deserted Square to the solitary lamp of the White Star, his horse's hoofs echoing against emptiness. The night was bitterly cold, the sky brilliant with stars. Dismounting in the stables he left his horse there and went into the tavern. Francis was waiting for him. He said, rising, that he had been waiting for two hours. Brian observed that two hours could seem a long time. Francis agreed, grimly, and then spoke in sharp incisive terms concerning Eleanor and Brian and himself. When he had finished Brian shrugged. Past question Eleanor had been explicit. 'And you still love her?' Brian asked, honestly curious. 'You lie like hell. Then you are stupid. Do I lose two hours' sleep so that I may annoy Beverly with rhetoric?' Francis picked up his hat and set it on his head. 'Whether she loves me does not matter now, nor whether I love her. It is quite enough for me that I do not like you.' Brian began to take off his gloves. 'I see that we shall behave in this matter precisely as Louis expects.' Francis replied: 'That is for you to say,' and went out, slamming the door. Brian threw his other glove on the table and shouted into the kitchen for coffee.

He settled into a chair and stretched his boots toward the fire, sighing tiredly, loosening his collar. Let the tumult and the shouting die, let the captains and the kings depart, let the day fade utterly into the past and leave him quietness. He closed his eyes.

Irene had not, his brain mumbled, been perfectly adequate. It was understood that love was dead but there was a way of doing these things : a touch of pathos, a dash of brave gaiety, a lump in the throat the size of an egg——

They had stared at each other, on the landing just outside the Gold Room, neither very happy. Now after what seemed evasion and long waiting they were face to face at last and in each other's eyes they saw that all things were understood between them, and that, really, there was nothing to say. Love, their bright playboy, was dead and they were cheated of tears. Irene murmured : We may as well go, Brian ; and they turned away from the ballroom and went slowly down the steps, the music behind them growing fainter but not fading altogether from their ears until he closed the door of Irene's smaller living room and there was no sound but the purr of the fire on the hearth and a clock's ticking.

They had biscuits and wine before the fire, speaking very little. What was there to say ? Why did it have to end, Irene ? She did not know. Her shoulders were very white against the figured tapestry of her chair and the firelight glinted in her pale, uncurled hair. Why could he not love any more this white and gold loveliness ? What had been lost ? I loved you, Irene murmured, heaven knows why. I loved you for a year and a day and now it is finished. Devil take you for a worthless scoundrel, Brian. I feel old.

He had leaned back against the woodbox — he was sitting on the floor, facing her — and begun to talk rather well, he thought. He had plagiarised moderately from *The Widow of Malonce*, that strangely-titled and forgotten romance — for the Widow does not appear until the last page and then

only as a passer-by on the road the lovers are travelling – until Irene remembered her garter. It was too tight, she explained, yawning. She added, hands busy : They say it gives you varicose veins ; and shuddered.

What was there to say ? Love was dead. You remember, he said, the night you let me come home with you, how it snowed ? You remember, Irene ? There was snow in your hair. Her head turned slowly and, unexpectedly, she smiled. And you stepped into the pudding. She laughed. Brian held her eyes for a moment, then shrugged and refilled his glass.

Irene said : How young we were ; and became once more a graven image. She could become at will perfectly quiescent ; it was one of her gifts. An image of ivory and gold, at ease, knees crossed under a shining gown that clung fluidly to her leg and thigh, outlining it to her slipper's tip, head drooping, the firelight in her eyes. She said slowly, meditatively : Once you did not talk so much, Brian ; once you never took your eyes off me, once a loosened shoulder strap was enough to start you galloping through puddings. And once, God bless you, I thought you were the handsomest, bravest and wittiest gentleman alive. I would think of you for hours at a time. I loved you. But now—— She looked at him and moved one bare arm ; lifted it and then allowed it to fall into her lap again.

Well, says Brian, we can still be very good friends. Irene said : Yes, I hope so ; why not ? and Brian rose clumsily to his feet. What was there to say ? Good night, Irene.

She looked up. It is a heartbreaking shame, Brian. I did love you.

And I loved you, Irene, more than I can say.

They smiled into each other's eyes. Good night, Brian.

He kissed her for the last time and went away, holding his sword against his legs.

— Yet each, he realised now, had been helpless. The earlier fine confidence, that perfect trust in the other which had made nothing embarrassing, no word or action undignified because all sprang from love — this was gone and each faced the other from behind a mask, the protective sheath which strangers wear. There could be little pathos in a leave-taking that was welcome to both ; but nothing, it seemed to him, so proclaimed love's death as this change, this reluctance to wear one's heart on one's sleeve ; and love itself offered nothing so desirable as the removal of the mask, the stripping of the sheath. He began to understand why their parting had been inevitable.

She had been a delightful playmate for a year. But in a world where everyone was born dreadfully alone, where one spent half a lifetime in search of a friend, where loneliness, unimaginably bitter loneliness, sent crippled and mutilated souls prematurely to paradise via the mad-house — in such a world a playmate was not enough. Sturdier, more enduring qualities were demanded than even the most delightful of playmates could muster. Once he had agreed with the axiom which stated that a woman was nothing if she was not young, pretty and somebody's mistress ; that her purpose in life was to be loved and the shape of her destiny accurately betrayed by that of her hips. Now he was not so sure. For a year he and Irene had been lovers and, though there were a few episodes in it that made him squirm to recall, he could not honestly regret a minute of it. She had been all he wanted then ;

but he was a year older now and wanted, needed, more. This more he had not found in Irene nor – it occurred to Brian – she in him. Others might.

This more – whose exact nature he was not prepared to identify nor disposed to analyse – he had not found in Irene ; but were Eleanor to cup her two hands and hold them out to him—— The conceit pleased him and he fell to dreaming of Eleanor. Into that curiously fluid space back of his eyes where just now Irene had been an image of ivory and gold with the firelight on her, Eleanor came. He remembered her incomparable hair as it had been under a hundred lamps and the chiselled perfection of her profile during the seconds before she turned to greet him ; the curve of her back where his hand had rested while the violins sang, and the small, delicious creases where met four great works of a loving God – Eleanor's arms and breasts. She appeared to him – besotted with weariness and Blugete's coffee – against a screen of light and music, vanished and returned, now supple in his arms, now going down marble stairs at Francis's side ; sometimes no more than an arm and shoulder in a light-filled doorway, sometimes whole and upright in a white satin gown. Always she was Eleanor, beautiful and desirable beyond putting into words. He felt his throat fill with love, he ached with a desire to perform prodigious deeds in her honour and contemplated briefly standing guard under her window while she slept. For nearly an hour he dreamed of her.

The tavern door opened and a gust of cold air awoke him. He glanced up and saw the towers of the palace, bleak rock against a grey, ugly sky. He thought of Peter sleeping in his lonely bed there, of Eleanor yonder with her lovely eyes closed, of

Louis and Elizabeth who also were beginning the new year like wise people. But he did not envy them much. When one had sat or played the night through there was a decidedly pleasant sense of having pilfered extra hours from time to atone for burning eyes and a bad taste in the mouth. Brian yawned. The baker kicked the door shut and poured bread and rolls into a bin with a sound like cracking eggs. Blugete was making fresh coffee and the smell of it filled the room.

He had a cup of it, boiling hot, with two raisin buns still warm from the ovens, and left as the first of the night's adventurers began to trickle in. Yes, he would probably attend the hunt. Then they asked him what was this about him and Irene – his name and hers must have been current in every bedroom in the city during the night – but he put them off with a wave of the hand. They would learn soon enough.

CHAPTER IX

two gloved hands beat softly against each other as he finished and made him look up. A sheet of music glided to the floor slowly. The room was dark ; an afternoon was dying in sober monochrome outside and the one window was a slim rectangle of un-luminous grey. There was a fire in the next room ; it gave more heat than light but he needed little light to see Eleanor by. The song he had been playing was absorbed into the stillness after a while and then the room was perfectly quiet, so quiet that both heard the tiny click when he laid his flageolet upon the piano.

He did not move, nor did Eleanor. She stood in the doorway to the dining room sidewise, looking at him along a shoulder of blue silk she had let her furs uncover. Her hat was red and her small boots, creased at the insteps, were also red. The firelight from the dining room edged her silhouette with a band of warm yellow, something like the aura of a saint in an old painting but—to Brian—rather more attractive. He leaned back in his chair at the tall window's foot and said : ' I am not dreaming. What are you doing in my house ? '

Her hat was lower over one eye than over the other, saucily. She drawled : ' I have been down the lane to Daniel's, buying a book. Here it is. I have bought books from him before. And I remembered, as I was passing——'

' I will believe that if you insist. Besides, there is the book. But it would be so very nice if you could

say – truthfully, I mean – that you really started out to see me. Or rather to give me a glimpse of you.’

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘it would. I really came out to see you and to let you look at me.’

‘I will remember that,’ he promised her, ‘at all sorts of times, in the strangest places.’

‘But I can stay only for a moment. I must be going very soon.’

‘I do not mind. A moment should never be long. And you need not make talk unless you want to.’

‘Just looking is enough?’

‘God’s plenty.’

Her lips were trembling; now they parted and she smiled; the smile was accompanied by a comfortable little sigh. Brian said: ‘Lord! how beautiful you are.’

‘Do you really think so?’

‘How can you doubt me?’

‘It may be,’ she explained, ‘this queer darkness.’

‘No. The darkness has nothing to do with it.’

‘What is so beautiful about me?’

‘Everything.’

After a minute she says: ‘Well – go on.’

Brian chuckled. Eleanor says, protestingly: ‘But that is so vague. You know it is. Do stop grinning at me.’

He waved a hand. ‘Your eyes are beautiful and so is your smile and your hair and your nose and your clothes and your drawl – all of you. I never saw lovelier.’

‘Oh – have I a drawl?’

‘A beautiful one. Say Ah.’

‘Ah.’

‘Ravishing.’

‘And you like this dress?’ She swept back her cloak and lifted her gown and examined it

interestedly. Brian eyed six inches of leg below the fur-edged skirt. 'Are they silk all the way up?'

'My stockings? Yes.' The skirt fell. 'Is that all the clothes you see?'

'What book did Daniel sell you?'

'Messer Geoffrey Chaucer's.'

'I have not read it since I was a boy. Do you like poetry?'

'Whose?'

'Perfect. There is cake and wine on the side-board inside.'

'Shall I serve you?'

'I dare not go near you. It would spoil the moment.'

'For both of us,' she agreed. She left the doorway empty, then reappeared to place a cake and a glass of wine on the piano's flat, shining top. She went into the dining room a second time. The room was very dark; he could just distinguish her face and hands, once she was in the doorway again, while to her, he reflected, he must be only a head and shoulders back of the piano, silhouetted against the window.

'These are good cakes,' she says.

'They are.' Brian picked the nut off the top of his and chewed it ruminatively. 'When I was a young lad,' he says, 'I always saved the top of my cake for the last.'

'How strange. I do the same.'

'Not really?'

'Yes, really.'

'As a sort of reward for eating the bottom?'

'Exactly.'

It appeared to him a vastly important revelation. He considered it at length. 'And you still do it?'

'Look.'

‘It is too dark.’

‘This is the top. I am going to eat it now.’ She did. Brian watched her and said: ‘Does it taste good?’

She patted her stomach. ‘Um!’

‘It once occurred to me – I cannot remember when or how – that I did not have to eat the bottom at all. There was a discovery! But I still do. I have always felt there was a profound philosophical implication in this: just what I do not know.’

‘It would take some thinking.’

‘I leave you to discover it and let me know.’

‘Uh-huh. When I was a girl I had a notion all bakers were hopelessly cowed by our elders and I intended, when I was grown up and married, to astonish the world with a cake that was icing all over, top, bottom and sides. Then my governess told me about worms and I took to drinking vinegar on the sly.’

‘Elizabeth was mad about pickles. I stole hundreds for her from the pantry at Four Courts.’

‘They do keep you thin.’

‘You believe that?’

‘Why do you throw salt over your shoulder?’

Brian gargled wine. ‘Anyhow,’ he says evasively, ‘Elizabeth will never be fat.’

‘Her mother was fat.’

‘It does not go by parents but by grandparents. If Elizabeth gets a daughter she——’

‘Do you think it likely?’

‘It is absolutely certain.’

‘Heavens! who is the man?’

‘What man?’

‘The father of the child.’

‘What child?’

‘Elizabeth’s.’

Brian choked. Eleanor laughed. 'Shall I pound your back?'

'I ought to pound yours. Give me some more wine.'

'Say please.'

'Please, Eleanor, give me some more wine.'

She leaned over the piano and poured. 'Well?'

'Thank you.'

'You are welcome,' she said, and went back to the doorway. 'I am afraid we will not live to see your theory proved one way or another, Brian.'

'She will marry some day, when she meets a man nearly her equal.'

'Rubbish.'

'Eleanor, she is a very exceptional woman.'

'Any woman who is still a virgin at twenty-six is exceptional. She is, in fact, something of a spectacle. After all one owes something to one's age.' Eleanor spoke with the profound dispassion of a widow, or of a mother of four children, say, speaking to the mother of one.

'Her virginity,' says Brian, 'has nothing to do with it.'

'What is she waiting for, a god?'

'Presumably for a man she can love.'

'And what kind of a man is that?'

Brian shrugged. 'How should I know? But he will be a king among men who gets her.'

Eleanor lifted her nose out of her glass, stared at Brian and burst into laughter. 'Give her Peter!'

'Oh, my lord!' disgustedly.

'Why not? He is practically a virgin himself. I think the idea is sublime.'

'The idea is terrible. The wine is going to your head.'

'Shall we quarrel about it?'

‘ Only if you want me to suffer.’

‘ Would you suffer?’

‘ Horribly.’

‘ Then we will not quarrel.’ She came over slowly and leaned against the piano and smiled at him. The window was no longer grey but blue. ‘ Though we could kiss and make up afterward and that is always very nice. We could kiss, anyhow. Do you think you could let me go if I kissed you now? I must be going.’

‘ Where?’

‘ To Anne’s. She is giving a supper and wants me to stay overnight. Are you going to the hunt?’

‘ Yes. I will be at Basil’s to-night. And you?’

‘ No. I am too much of a coward once I get into a saddle. Though I like horses and like to watch a man who rides well. I saw you last Friday.’

‘ Where was I?’

‘ You rode up to the White Star with three or four other men. I was coming back from the dress-maker’s.’

‘ I remember. And I was by far the handsomest of the lot?’

‘ Of course. Where will you have supper to-morrow night? Anne is having a large crowd over.’

She was at his side now and he was holding her hand. He looked up at her. ‘ I could attend that to be sure.’

‘ But if I got something ready, just for the two of us, Brian?’

‘ That,’ he said, ‘ would be bringing paradise to West Lane.’

‘ And that,’ she said, ‘ is another reason I visited you to-day. Here is your kiss now and let me go.’

‘ It is very hard,’ he murmured. Her lips touched his lightly for a half-second; they were warm and

soft and she smelled sweet. Then her hand had slipped out of his. At the door she looked back. 'Mind, I will be expecting you.'

'I will be there,' he promised. 'What will you have for me? I will be hungry, I warn you.'

'What do you want?'

'Whatever you give me.'

'If only you will always be so easy to please! Good-bye.' She blew him a kiss and was gone.

After a while he rose and rang for lamps. At Louis's that night he drank rather more than was good for him. Francis was civil but no more; Elizabeth worried about to-morrow's weather. Re-crossing the Square to his own house Brian glanced at the sky and sniffed the wind and decided it would be good enough.

CHAPTER X

IT was. The day of the hunt was very fine with a flood of sunshine, cold but bright, and a sky of pale blue that a stiff north-west wind kept clean of clouds. There was some snow still left on the ground ; the ground itself was frozen hard with panes of ice here and there which hoofs crashed into splinters. Half the court was scattered across the hills and fields but Brian rode alone and when he glimpsed strayed riders, swerved away. A pond in a little hollow lured him to the ground and he proved to himself that he had not forgotten how to skate. His horse watched interestedly while Brian made a short run and then slid stiff-legged down the dark-coloured ice, the nails in his boots leaving white scars. He found a hole in the other bank and spent fifteen absorbed minutes poking – fruitlessly – into it with a stick and another fifteen throwing snowballs at it. His marksmanship was only fair ; the snow was too dry for the moulding of firm, shapely balls that would fly true. He mounted again and discovered a path that led past a dilapidated cabin, across a meadow, up a steep bank of white stone, and along it to the edge of a small cliff.

From that wind-blown eminence, once his horse had finished waving his head and snorting, Brian communed with nature. This was a winter country, bare, frozen, black where it was not touched with snow, yet not altogether ugly. There was no blue haze of distance to soften and beautify, no colour, no warmth, almost no life ; where the hills of June

healed with their loveliness, these challenged with desolation and a wind from the outer edges of space. It was menacing ; it defied him to get down on his feet and face it and survive. It had the bleak hard beauty of a rock ; it was worth, Brian decided, a half-frozen face ; thoughts of the hot supper Eleanor would give him were made triply delicious by the wind in his ears ; and the effect – a man on horseback at a cliff's edge, in mysterious and brooding contemplation – must be, from below, strikingly picturesque. But no possible admirer appeared anywhere in sight and the wind was cold so Brian moved on.

He swung his horse south toward the lodge ; his shadow grew longer as he climbed a low rise and went down the other side. He felt at peace, content with everything. On the horizon Eleanor waited and he was going to her, but this hour also was sweet. The hard unbeautiful earth, the high vacant sky, the stillness broken by a horn or a dog's bark – he catalogued industriously and then decided it was no more than the fresh air reacting on his liver. It is good to be alone, he thought, and enjoyed himself quietly for fifty yards. At their end, under a cluster of naked trees, he found Elizabeth and Peter.

The sun was sinking into the plain about a mile to his left as he rode through the Blue Gate. His horse trotted briskly, glad to be getting home, and Brian gave him his head with a fine indifference to the other traffic, mostly pedestrians supper-bound and short of temper. The lamp-lighters were out. The brief winter twilight had become night when he dismounted in West Lane.

She met him in the hall ; there was no light here save a purple glow at the far end where there was a

pointed window of coloured glass. Her gown was cut low at her breast and Brian watched the white square rise and fall evenly. 'Do not touch me,' he says, retreating, 'until I have cleaned up a bit.' But her outstretched hand did not move and her eyes were imperious, so Brian kissed the small fingers lightly.

'Now hurry, for supper is waiting,' she says.

'I am not very hungry,' he replied, and had to deny immediately that he was ill. He tramped up the stairs. During supper they talked very little; when coffee came Brian leaned back and told Eleanor what he had seen. He was brief for there was not much to tell and when he had finished Eleanor eyed him thoughtfully. 'A kiss is no great matter; such things happen very easily in the open country.'

Brian agreed. 'That is a fact,' he says. 'I have often noticed it myself. I can start out with the best intentions in the world but no sooner are the two of us alone than I forget all about the scenery. She becomes a nymph and I am a satyr in no time at all. I suppose it is the touch of the naked earth. But this was not that kind of a kiss, Eleanor.'

She smiled a little. 'It would be hard to imagine Peter as a satyr. So you think they really love each other?'

He says, soberly: 'I saw her face, Eleanor. It is indecent for love to be like her love. It makes me feel mean and soiled. Yes, they love each other.'

'Then their lives will be wretched affairs for a while.'

He looked up. 'Did Francis tell you anything?'

She nodded. 'Enough. He was always boasting, promising.'

'Promising? Promising what?'

She stared at him. 'I forget. You made me forget. What do you suppose Peter will do now?'

Brian grunted. 'It would surprise you to know how little he will be able to do. Louis began to work the day Eric died.'

'He is terrible, that man. They are a good deal alike, too. Elizabeth and her father, I mean.'

'Then each will have his own way.'

'What makes you think so? A woman can be in love and still have room for other things, Brian. Her heart may be his but she cannot give her wits away.'

'You mean you - she also has that little voice far back at even the most engrossing moments? That is a dreadful piece of information, Eleanor, and I prefer to forget it.'

'Elizabeth is Louis's daughter and she will remember that because it is impossible for her not to.' Eleanor twirled her cup. 'Have you ever noticed that the coffee does not move when you spin the cup - so?'

'You are talking, madame, to a gentleman who has considered that identical phenomenon and argued upon it at length. The White Star is noted for its early breakfasts and the weighty matters there discussed as dawn approaches. It is my unshakable belief that the wine or coffee moves, that a Wallace three years old is superior to any other horse alive and that when you come to marry almost any woman will do.'

Eleanor dipped a piece of biscuit into her coffee and then into her mouth. 'If Peter were not the man he is - but Peter is no whirlwind to sweep a woman off her feet.' Eleanor chuckled. 'He is the sort a woman gives a favour to because he has been such a good boy all the month. Though Elizabeth may

actually love him. In any event, Brian, she will do her own deciding. And I think the coffee does not move.'

Brian rolled a bread pill. 'Do you like whirlwinds?' he asked casually.

Eleanor eyed him over the rim of her cup while she drank, then held the cup under her chin. She says: 'Stop worrying, Brian.'

Indignantly: 'I am not worrying. Worrying about what?'

'When a woman is ready to be swept off her feet she can do wonders before even a zephyr like Peter.' Eleanor lowered her cup, choking with laughter. 'Brian, you precious idiot!'

'Never you mind. Brian and Peter are two men.'

'I hope so. Elizabeth and Eleanor are two women.' She leaned back. 'She was brought up in a house full of men, no? She has always made me feel like a half-grown girl, me! Well, she will learn something now, I wager.'

'Eleanor!' says Brian, shocked.

'She will.'

Brian threw up his shoulders. 'You women!'

Eleanor rose, slender and lovely, and came over to sit on the arm of his chair. Her gown caught somewhere below; she freed it and then leaned against him, hand on his shoulder. 'I always forget she is your sister.'

Brian cupped her hand in his own. 'You understand, Eleanor, they were so - so young and beautiful back there under those dreary trees. Love bathed them like a lamp. I tried to take the thing sensibly. I thought: Well, well, here are another man and woman making love; let us see how far they go in spite of the weather. Yes, I said that. I was trying to be sensible about it. But I saw the

CHAPTER XI

LATER in the week he wrote to Eleanor: 'Peter has ordered a review of all the regiments now stationed in the city; it will take place to-morrow afternoon in the Square. This makes it impossible for me to see you until then; I shall be busy all to-day and a good part of the night. Fortunately the lyric I told you about is finished, the melody also. It is called 'Bridal' and I think you will like it. - There is nothing unusual in the order of course, but I cannot help wondering if Elizabeth has already spoken. I feel sure she has not; it is more likely that Louis - in the furtherance of his great work - is about to elevate a few more northmen into purely decorative captaincies. If so I shall rise with them; Louis has been promising me an eagle for some time and you may find yourself entertaining a colonel, no less. - Do not come out if the weather is too unpleasant. Your lover, Brian.'

He sent the note off by a servant and went below. Robert Vareson, his orderly, a large solid man of forty, moustached and weatherbeaten, whom one would know for a soldier in the dark, was waiting with their horses. The sky was over-cast with grey; nothing cast a shadow. The air was chilly. 'We shall be well frozen to-morrow,' Brian commented as they moved off.

At the White Star they found the hitching-rail crowded with horses, all of them good and most of them under military harness. Robert said: 'I will

go around to the Heart of Oak, sir. In fifteen minutes ?’

‘Fifteen will do.’

The taproom was full of uniforms and noise ; every officer in the city seemed to be present and everyone was talking at the top of his voice. Young men strutted up and down rattling their swords or leaned against the bar and argued passionately ; older men sat at the tables clutching beer tankards and bearing, above uniforms a shade too snug, expressions grave enough for the eve of a battle. The atmosphere was intensely martial ; not a woman’s name could be heard anywhere.

Brian pushed through looking for someone from his own barracks but found no one and he ordered a glass of brandy gloomily. As he sat drinking it and listening with one ear to a fat lieutenant tell an excessively dreary story to three officers of assorted ranks and deficient humour, he espied a northman from his barracks. He called to the blonde giant, bade him sit down and drink, but Eric declined. ‘I am sorry, Brian, I am leaving now. Have you seen Beverly ?’

‘No. Wait for me.’

‘You will understand better when I tell you that a friend of mine who knows how susceptible I am to colds is taking me in her coach. But where the devil can that poet be ? He promised me a poem ; it is already paid for and I will need it to-morrow. You cannot imagine how intellectual she is.’

‘Intellectual ?’

‘Oh, good God, yes.’

‘Go away, go on.’

Eric left, grinning, and Brian had his glass refilled. ‘I do not like intellectual women ; I do not know why but I just do not like them.’

The fat lieutenant inquired : ' What did you say, sir ? '

' Nothing. That is, I was talking to myself.'

' Your pardon.' He resumed his story and Brian finished his glass. Outside Robert was waiting ; Brian mounted and they started north across the city. Once they had left the Square behind their way led through a perfect maze of winding, nameless lanes, wholly unpaved or laid with cobblestones their horses trod like eggs. They rode abreast and walkers had to hug the walls as they went by. The houses were mean and of an antique architecture ; Brian glimpsed a child in an upper window, nose flat against the glass and straining its neck to watch the soldiers pass, and in no explicable fashion its white face became, for Brian, a part of Robert's story. When he asked, at the end : ' And what became of the child ? ' Robert demanded : ' What child ? There were no children. She refused to bear any because she said a midwife had told her it would kill her.'

' That is marriage for you,' says Robert, shaking his head. This was earlier ; they had been speaking of some related subject, with the Square not far behind them.

' You do not admire the custom, Robert ? '

' To the left, sir. It is for those that like it, as I have always said. Between wives, mothers-in-law, household duties and so on, a man married becomes a good deal of an old woman himself. He walks on the flat of his feet, he is always worrying about unimportant things, there is no fire in him.'

' And that is what happened to your brother ? '

Robert answered with perfect gravity : ' No. My brother's marriage was a failure.'

' He lacked the makings of a good husband, then ? '

‘He was too good for her. I do not know to this day why he married her; he could have got her as he got the rest. Women liked him; he was a big man, bigger than me, good-looking, always laughing, strong as a horse. I remember once a girl in a tavern began to bite him. Umm. On the bare shoulder. He slapped her loose, crooked his arm and told her to sink her teeth in the muscle if she could. And damn me if she didn’t. We poured some wine on the wounds but he has the scars yet. She went away with a rider for Lamoman not long afterward.’

‘Who? Your brother’s wife?’

‘No. This girl who bit him. She was a good girl but man-crazy.’

‘Tell me about your brother’s wife.’

‘Oh, Felice? Well——’

‘Was that her name – Felice?’

‘Yes. She was not from our part of the city; her mother kept a little candy shop up near the north gate and when she died Felice came to live with a married sister in the Iron Lane. Her sister was a big good-natured cow; she had a baby every year and never lost a pound. Felice was mostly bone. Her sister once told my brother that Felice had wanted to be a duke’s mistress. Imagine! But all girls have these dreams, I suppose.’

Brian nodded. ‘Yes.’ He says: ‘Yes, I suppose they have.’

‘She woke up. She was an ordinary-sized woman with very dark skin and hair; a brown woman. Her mouth was small and her ankles thick and there was a big jaw on her. When you looked at her from behind you saw her jaw sticking out on both sides of her neck. She had a queer walk that kept her rump shaking like jelly; men looked at her on the

street and she was always complaining about being followed. I am suspicious of women who have that trouble. My brother never was though.'

'How did they meet?'

'She was passing his forge one day and he called to her; he used to call to every pretty girl that passed. She stopped, smiled, they talked; in three months they were married. God knows why. He treated her well; he did his day's work at the forge, gave her money whenever she asked for it and did not bother much with other women. You would think a woman would be satisfied, eh?'

'You would.'

'But not Felice. One afternoon my brother comes home for some oil to put on a burn and finds the two of them in bed.'

'The two of who?'

'Felice and this innkeeper Blugete.'

'Blugete?'

'He owns the White Star now. Yes.'

'That little man with the limp?'

'Yes. He owned a small place on the Iron Lane in those days. My brother knew him well – but it was like a clap of thunder you understand. He told me afterward he just stood there and stared. He did not feel anger – nothing but amazement. Well – he plucked Blugete out of the bed and threw him across the room. Blugete's hip cracked and he lay there moaning. My brother had not really meant to hurt him and he started to help, and while he was bending over him Felice picked up a stool and broke it over my brother's head. Then she put on a dress and screamed for the police.'

'Hell.'

'Nothing happened. The magistrate said Blugete had got what he deserved and my brother was

advised to give his wife a sound whipping. He never did though ; he sold his business and entered the service under the late Duke Richard in the western provinces. I learnt the whole story when my captain told me we were to get a skilled farrier at last and it turned out to be my brother. He has a very good post there now.'

'And Felice?'

'She went to live with Blugete. She is still with him.'

'That square-jawed woman?'

'Yes.'

'And what became of the child?'

'What child? There were no children. She refused to bear any because she said a midwife had told her it would kill her.'

'I thought there was a child.'

'Not even by Blugete. Will you believe that this was the first time and they had no more than got into bed? Yes, by God!'

Brian grinned. They were approaching the barracks; among the pedestrians uniforms predominated while nothing but inns and military goods shops lined both sides of the lane. Ahead of them it seemed to end abruptly against a brick wall; they rode intrepidly toward a drawing and a phrase someone had chalked on this wall, then swerved sharply. The lane ended; the wall was one side of a famous inn, The Armed Venus; beyond it was the flat and yellow earth of the parade ground. They started across this plain toward one of the squat, heavy barracks.

Says Brian: 'Every story without exception should hold a moral. I have been trying to discover the point, the lesson of yours, and I think I have it now. You did not, if you recall, mention love once.'

And you were right and it explains everything. With love present you would have had tragedy; without it only farce or very sordid double-dealing.'

'They liked each other, but I never heard of such things lasting.'

There was an enormous amount of sky above them; on the rim of the plain half a dozen pigmy riders wheeled and charged. Brian argued into the wind: 'Because love is a good deal less common than raspberries, because it is as rare as intelligence and humour and imagination and a certain eternal innocence. These incredible people who live – to a great age, very often – accepting without question your dogma that such things do not last – these people have no conception of love. They are incapable of it, of even imagining it; they could no more love a man or woman or anyone than they could write a poem or paint a picture. For love also is an art, Robert, to be practised and enjoyed and kept alive by the few.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now to-morrow——' And Brian sang:

*'She is the golden maiden
The love gods shaped for me. : . .'*

CHAPTER XII

ON the edge of the Square a window became yellow with lamplight, then another. Suppers would be late everywhere to-night for the regiments had not entered the Square until after three. Now the sun had set and the flags, hundreds of them, lifted into a cruel angry wind, snapped tirelessly against a darkening winter sky. Men and horses stood immovable, quiet, frozen into stone, an army of heroic figures. Where the flags were thickest, by the arched palace gate, a herald spoke names into large, unechoing space ; and a horse would come to life and go forward, and return.

Men on horseback, sword-bearers, warriors. . . . From the beginning there had been warriors. He recalled hazily the battalions that had marched and fought – always, by some evil chance, on an unrememberable date – through the pages of his history book, but vividly the men who had led them ; and still did, no doubt, through some blessed and gory and uncalendared Valhalla. Large, bearded men, decoratively scarred, who declared war on the slightest of provocations and fought for years at a stretch, who never moved a leg without a deal of roaring and clanking, who drank immoderately, were uniformly unfortunate in their sons-in-law and who died surnamed Conqueror or Great or Damned.

War – he reflected – was a stupidity and a madness, a quite overwhelming evidence of man's incurable imbecility. So much a man of intelligence, considering it as became him, must needs concede

even when seated on a horse, a sword hanging from his belt. And with so much said all was ; for this was one example of human superiority to the beasts that the intelligent man preferred not to think of at length. To explain it, to label it, was an intellectual necessity, but to justify it a task best left to priests who read between printed lines and politicians who went about listening to the voice of God in the highways.

They had swung west of the palace walls and the Square and gone south through the odoriferous Lane of the Meat Shops to the King's Road, up which they doubled to the Royal Square, trumpets going before them. There had been a little sunshine then and the regiments were a flowing river of metal and coloured cloth between the drab citizenry packed on either side. Boys shouted that the soldiers were coming and scuttled ahead like rabbits ; as the roar of the crowd struck even the horses held their heads higher. Brian had straightened in his saddle and when Roland came into view above the open end of the King's Road he saluted impulsively. He could not help it. We also, he had thought, we also are men on horseback, sword-bearers, warriors. . . .

The end was always mean, the cause never anything but contemptible. The orators, unable to look bravely upon the shambles they had created and down into which the warriors rode, gorged themselves with dishonesty and lies—loathsome swine. The men, the warriors, they alone saved the spectacle from becoming utter horror, too sickening for even a statesman to contemplate. They did their part magnificently as always. In their hands war ceased to be an excuse for thievery and patriotism and manslaughter on a grand scale, and became a

gesture, a gauntlet flung into the face of the unheeding skies, man's supreme effort to prove that a man could be admirable.

For what counted in the end were not the additional thousands of widows and taxable acres and memorial arches, but the fact that men could be brave, could face death, could go out in a long, wavering line through rain and mud and darkness, dirty, tired, sick but going on, unfalteringly; could endure as much as any son of God had ever endured and die with some small precious part of themselves eternally their own — this counted. And though the cause they died for was mean and utterly contemptible, the hog-grunt of an orator, their manner of dying helped one to believe that another son of God had died for a cause less so, a little less. . . .

His name rolled through the dusk, and before Eleanor and the thousands Louis of Basil pinned a silver eagle to his chest. Peter, Roland's winged helmet on his head, Roland's war sword at his hip, a magnificent figure on a superb horse, returned his salute and bade him be always a good soldier and a man of honour. A solemn moment. He wheeled his horse and went back to his men. A trumpet blew and a coach sped across the open space before the regiments to the group under the flags. Brian recognised it but there was no way of learning if Elizabeth was inside. Both Peter and Louis dismounted and entered the coach; its door closed and then the trumpet sounded again. Brian saw the bronze gates close behind the coach as he turned his horse into the welter the Square had become.

For no reason at all he felt very sure that there were now three people inside that coach. But it did

not matter. Peter was happy, no doubt, and surely Elizabeth also got some pleasure out of sitting there, her hip touching her lover's. And Louis of Basil, a good day's work done, must likewise be content. Certainly Brian was as he pushed through a noisy and hungry crowd in search of Eleanor. He found her in her coach, a hundred yards this side of the Long Lane. Francis was not in sight.

But nothing was to mar the perfection of this night. He realised this in the quiet moment before any word was spoken, as her eyes lifted and he remembered that she had been waiting all this while for him. Their eyes met, held ; it was as if they had kissed. Then a gleam of light found a haven in a jewel at Eleanor's throat as she leaned forward and said : ' So you got your eagle, Brian.'

His horse was restless and his spurred boot moved near the hand she rested on the door. ' Yes, I got it.' He added, bending : ' It was too cold for you to come out. Hurry home while I get my flageolet.'

' Bother the music.'

' Oh, we must have music,' He sneezed twice. ' I shall probably die of pneumonia. Where the devil is my handkerchief? '

' Here, take mine.' She gave him a fragment of linen and lace. ' I think I shall rub you with goose grease to-night. One can never tell what a cold will lead to.'

' Mmm. I shall be with you in half an hour.'

Then they parted. He remembered, as he went by a confectioner's shop, that it was Twelfth Night.

CHAPTER XIII

AND nothing was to mar the perfection of this Twelfth Night, which promised to be one of the coldest and darkest of the winter. . . .

Marna let him in ; the door closed and at once a large peace and contentment was his. He felt like a man come home. The hall was warm and brightly lighted ; through the dining room's open door he saw a fire, a table, dishes and silverware. There were heavy rugs on the floor, etchings on the walls, an old and mellow glow in the furniture. He noticed these things, but briefly, for Eleanor was standing midway up the stairs, one hand on the rail and the other holding her skirt. She wore a gown of canary-yellow silk, very full as to skirt and very snug as to bodice, which was moulded of gold lace and concealed nothing. There were rubies in her dark hair ; her bare arms and shoulders were their own ornaments. She flamed against the cream and mahogany of the stairs and to her exceeding loveliness Brian swept off his hat.

She drawled, without moving : ' The warrior is come home from the wars, the winter wind at his back and his spurs ringing.'

He was pulling off his gloves. ' And very glad of it too. The wind is getting colder and there is not a soul left on the streets.'

' Brrr ! ' shivering delicately. ' You looked very nice as you came in the door, Brian. Wintry and wind-blown and stalwart. And you blinked.'

' The lights,' he explained, waving a hand.

She started down. He saw that her slippers were golden, her stockings a paler gold. Music should have played as she came toward him, moving on her reflection in the floor as on a cloud. 'You must give me your sword,' she says.

But first he kissed her hand. While she went back up the stairs, his sword in the crook of her arm, he sampled the bowl of mulled wine by the dining room fire. Over the rim of his second cup he smiled into Eleanor's eyes. 'I have been thinking of this moment all day. For sheer animal comfort give me a bad winter day with an end to it like this : a snug fire and supper waiting.'

'Drink,' says Eleanor, 'supper is waiting.'

She carved expertly after Brian had sworn he could not. 'What part do you want?' she asked, carving knife poised.

'The white meat, please.'

'I like the white meat too. What will we do with the rest of it? The cook likes the white meat too.'

'Legs are a grossly over-rated delicacy.'

'Whose legs?'

'Turkeys', chickens', of course.'

'Of course, Brian!'

Browned potatoes roasted with the turkey, nutted stuffing, bitter jelly, celery, fresh white bread, the sweetest butter—coffee and repletion finally. Brian sat back, easing the napkin out from under his chin, and surveyed the devastation happily. 'By God, Eleanor, that was a meal.'

'Was everything good?'

He patted a bulging stomach. 'I have always held that there is no one like a widow to feed a man properly.'

She was pouring his coffee.

‘I like to see a man eat and you deserved something after being out in that wind all day. How is your cold?’

‘I think it will be all right. It helped a little to remember that Louis has rheumatism. By the way, was Elizabeth in that coach?’

Eleanor nodded. Brian helped himself to sugar. ‘They must be having dinner at the palace.’

‘Do you think Louis suspects anything?’

‘How could he? How could anyone?’

Eleanor said: ‘Which do you want, pie or pudding?’

‘Give me pie. Did you like the show?’

‘You mean the parade? Not much.’

‘Why not?’

‘Even if you had not been out there—— You all sat so still and there were so many of you, rank on rank, sitting there for hours, never moving. As if you were waiting to ride away to war—or for God to speak and give you life.’

‘I could think of nothing but the supper you would have waiting for me and damn Louis at five minute intervals,’ he lied experimentally, for Eleanor might prefer her heroes devoid of self-consciousness. He was rather pleased to hear her slightly disappointed: ‘Did you really?’

‘No. I also thought of war and the men who go out to die for the preservation of wall mottoes.’

‘Here. Be careful – it is still hot.’ She gave him his pie and then cut a piece for herself. ‘Marching men always make me sad. They are going away, they look straight ahead, they carry heavy, ugly swords——’ She shrugged the matter out of her mind. ‘Men play silly and terrible games. Do you want more coffee, Brian?’

‘No, thank you.’

They were quiet for a while. The pie was very good. Scraping the plate he says : ' I would like to have another piece of this pie but I simply have no more room inside me.'

' Your eyes are bigger than your stomach.'

' But I will have more coffee.'

' I asked you if you wanted more.'

Then there was another quiet while. The maid moved silently about the room ; outside the wind bumped against the windows and a horse walked slowly up the lane, his hoofs keeping a queer sort of rhythmical beat. Brian, sunk in a blissful stupor, found that doing nothing but staring at Eleanor's head and shoulders was a pleasant thing to be doing. All were admirable and Eleanor did not seem to mind. He asked her, to make sure. She lifted her lashes with a dizzying effect and said, No. So he stared at her some more. She began to have trouble finding a place to rest her own eyes ; her lashes fluttered and a smile began to tug at the corners of her mouth. Finally she says : ' Stop grinning at me like that.'

' Like what ? ' he wanted to know.

She says : ' Come into the living room and behave yourself.'

He watched her rise, watched how the light played on her arms, how the look of her changed as she ceased to be only a head and voice and became a complete figure that stood upright at his elbow, gorgeously clothed. It was queer what joy he got out of the sight of her, out of reflecting that she was not only Eleanor of Lucé but a whole woman with feet and knees and hips. Would it be blasphemous, he wondered, to thank God for Eleanor's pectoral muscles ? The impulse to do so was there, unquestionably.

She had taken his hand and was trying to haul him out of his chair. She failed. 'Lord, you are heavy.'

He grinned up at her. 'One hundred and seventy-two pounds stripped.' Whereupon she plunged two hands into his hair and began to shake him furiously. He howled: 'Let go, you witch!' and tried to catch her in his arms but she wriggled free. He got to his feet and then followed her and unpacked his flageolet to the sound of three chords, ascending, in five flats, which were the high point of Eleanor's technique and of which she was inordinately proud. Then she rippled into a song: 'I love him and he loves me, and when we are together——' while Brian spread the music before her.

'Are you good in flats?'

She thumped out the famous chords.

'Are they flats?'

'They are.'

'Fine. Now listen to me closely.' And he explained what she was to play as coherently as was possible with her lips and eyes so close to his own. 'Is everything clear?'

She said it was and Brian picked up his instrument. 'Ready? One, two——'

Piano-wire and woodwind harmonised meltingly; then Brian sang:

*'She is the golden maiden
The love gods shaped for me,
With eyes like the light of heaven
And breasts of ivory.'*

Then Eleanor sang like an angel a second verse which Brian, piping a delicate obligato, heard

with the revolting complacency native to authors : and then they sang together the final verse, soaring up its last, exulting line :

*'We ride the wind to-night,
Above us an old moon is dying,
My love's young body is white!'*

Eleanor frowned at the paper. 'Try that break again, Brian. Where it goes Ta-ta-tum! ta-ta. There.'

'Sour?'

Her nose wrinkled. 'Very.'

'I need practice.'

They tried the break again.

'Much better. Now from the beginning again but not so fast. One, two——'

This time it came off very well. Brian leaned on the piano. 'Do you like it? Say you like it.'

Eleanor, eyes on the music, finger-tips seeking chords, said : 'That second verse, Brian!'

'The second verse? Oh, yes, to be sure. The one you sing.'

'Dog!'

Brian hid his face in a handkerchief and blew his nose. 'Well——' he began, slightly abashed. But Eleanor ignored him. She sang softly : '— is the golden maiden, tum rum! You can do amazing things with a flageolet. — shaped for me, tum tum—— What a run, Brian! Did you have to put it just there? But,' she says, 'my eyes are black.' And she looked up at him as if to prove it.

Brian took a deep breath, waved his flageolet in a helpless sort of way and then spoke warmly of poetic license. Her choosing to wear this gown, for instance, was nothing short of a happy miracle ;

and her eyes did dazzle him like heaven's more cerulescent light. In the following line, of course, the exigencies of his rhyme scheme had led him to state as a fact what might be unfavourably viewed as libel ; yet he could and did stoutly assert that final proof one way or another had so far been denied him. And now that she had brought it to his attention——

‘I never did,’ says Eleanor.

— he felt he could not, in justice either to her or to his conscience — and so on.

Eleanor handed him his flageolet. ‘It is much too early to consider such important matters. Play some more ; here is that waltz we danced to New Year’s Eve.’

He grumbled just enough and played and sang until his throat was parched. Then Eleanor went over by the fire to pour wine into very tall glasses while he put his instrument away. He joined her, blowing out all the lamps but one as he came. The room darkened, but slowly shadows came to life on every wall, dumb and quivering ghosts.

She seemed taller and slimmer in the firelight’s glow, lovelier than ever as she handed him his wine. He raised his glass. ‘To Eleanor of Lucé, whom I love with all my heart and soul.’

‘To Brian of Malvern, who says he loves me.’

He stopped her lifting arm. ‘Finish it.’

‘And whom I love.’

Then he allowed her to drink.

Glasses came to rest on a small table ; it bore, besides the wine, only a plate of round cakes. ‘I am glad to notice,’ he says, ‘the complete absence of any pudding whatever.’

Eleanor frowned. ‘Puddings ? Do you want pudding ? You did not touch it at supper.’

‘No. I wonder what made me think of puddings? Never mind. You have not said anything about my eagle,’ he says.

She came closer and examined it. ‘It is very pretty. It means you would have to ride first into battle, at the head of your men?’

He smiled. ‘Something like that, Eleanor.’

Her eyes never left his. They were wide dark pools; he sensed her unreasoning fear for him and this, with the nearness of her lips and her smooth, naked shoulders, made him feel unsteady. He could do no less than take her into his arms. Her eyes closed and her lips met his half-parted in the best style; the kiss was a delicious success but he was entirely unprepared for the fierce strength of her arms, pressing him against herself.

When they fell apart he understood and he eyed the red, angry flesh uncomfortably. Ardour in the woman one loved was desirable, certainly, but this——

‘You have hurt yourself,’ he said.

She glanced down. ‘That makes me what—a colonel?’

‘That makes you an utterly adorable woman who frightens me. You must never do anything like that again.’ He kissed the slope of her breast. ‘That will cure it. Now let us sit down and talk.’

‘We are talking.’

‘Do sit down.’

‘Take off your coat, Brian.’

He did. She admired his fine white shirt. ‘I never wear any but white,’ he says, sitting down beside her.

‘For your birthday,’ she says, moving a little so that he could put an arm around her, ‘I am going to get you the finest white shirt money can buy.’

‘ Move a little closer. Good. For yours I am going to get you a golden chemise with garters to match.’

‘ Why, that is what I am wearing now.’

‘ That is what I thought but I wanted to make sure. I am very clever in a small way.’

‘ Very. Do you want a cake ? ’

He selected one from the plate she held out.

‘ Three nuts ! But this is more than princely.’

‘ They are very rich ; you cannot have more than two.’

‘ What tyranny ! ’

She melted. ‘ Of course you can have all you want, Brian. But they are rich and you will be going to bed soon.’

‘ Oh, not for ages. Besides, to-morrow is Sunday and we can sleep late.’

Eleanor nibbled at her cake. ‘ Brian.’

‘ What ? ’

‘ I get a headache if I sleep late.’

‘ But I wanted to tell you such a lot, Eleanor.’

‘ About what ? ’

‘ About why I love you.’

‘ Oh,’ she drawled, ‘ I like that. Go on.’

‘ Ever since you gave me such a glimpse of your soul’s sweetness as almost made a coward of me I have been wanting to tell you about one lad, at least, who dreamt of a princess.’

‘ And one lad who found her.’

‘ Yes.’

‘ When did you first discover you loved me, Brian ? ’

‘ Christmas Eve, in the cathedral.’

‘ I was wearing my white lace.’

‘ And your white furs. When did you find out you loved me ? ’

She sat up a little and faced him. ‘ When I saw

you ride up to the White Star with some other men.'

'For heaven's sake!'

'Yes.' Her hand played with his. 'I picked you out of the lot instantly. This is Brian! my heart cried, and I watched you until you had gone inside. You never knew I was watching you; it was fun to think you did not know. And when I got home I said: I love him; and I hardly slept all night for fear you would fall in love with some other woman before I could see you.'

'You should have known I could not.' She settled back in his arm again and he pulled her close. 'You are very soft.'

'Do you want a kiss?'

'I do.'

'Close your eyes.'

Silence.

'You are not going to keep it?'

So he gave it back.

'Do you know,' he says, 'I thought of these little creases here for hours one night.'

'You did?'

'I did.' Her white shoulder rested against him, her lovely head touched his; she was very soft and warm against his side. He could look down and see the creases, temptingly close, and the swell of her breasts above the gold lace. She half turned her face toward him and they eyed each other somewhat mistily. Her lips seemed moist; undeniably they were sweet.

Eleanor murmured:

*'Dear, if you change I'll never choose again;
Brave, if you shrink, I'll never think of love;
Fair, if you fail——'*

‘ You know that ? ’ He put his mouth close to her ear and answered with the second verse :

*‘ Earth with her flowers shall sooner heaven adorn ;
Heaven her bright stars through earth’s dim globe
shall move ;
Fire heat shall lose——*

‘ Ere I prove false to faith or strange to you,’ he finished, as his lips found hers.

Not a long while afterward Brian put out the last lamp and they went slowly up the stairs. A great bed awaited them, high, carved and canopied ; and on one post of this bed Eleanor had hung his scabbard and sword.

Hours later he awoke, choking, and began to struggle with hands that clutched at his throat. Eleanor’s voice soothed him and her hand pressed him back on the pillow, then reached for more goose grease as he coughed and went back to sleep.

During the night the sky cleared.

CHAPTER XIV

DURING the night the sky cleared and he stepped through Eleanor's door into brilliant sunshine and the tenuous, calm music of distant church bells. Eleanor waved a hand from behind an upper window as he pointed his horse toward the sun-flooded Sunday morning vacancy of the Square, first reminding him by an explicit gesture that he was to rub his chest again before going to bed that night. Then the curtains closed ; and the music of the church bells and the dark cloud of Eleanor's hair on a pillow and the faintly unpleasing smell of goose grease were left him to remain unforgettable memories and the only memories of this night, just past. It was not very amusing.

Nor was it amusing that the bells should awaken older memories of other Sunday mornings, of clean unwrinkled shirts and early breakfasts and rides through quiet unfamiliar streets to the cathedral ; of an organ's impressive thunder and incense and his own voice soaring up the slanting shafts of many-coloured sunlights while God assuredly listened, gravely, cheek on fist, very like Louis of Basil during a flageolet lesson. Nor that he should now be wishing that he and Eleanor had gone to church this fine winter morning as, two by two, walking slowly, many others were.

He had lain abed until nearly noon, blowing his nose and watching Eleanor—who had refused to risk a headache—move about the room. Over her black nightdress she had put on an orange-coloured

wrap that seemed to be all fluttering loose ends, and on her bare feet slippers of white fur. She was clean and fresh and nice to look at and she seemed to be very busy, though he found it impossible to discover what she was doing. When he asked, her shoulders rose hopelessly. Anyone but he would have seen that she was trying to make the place look like something. She had found his clothes all over the room. And what had he done with her other stocking? Their talk drawled. . . . The weather? Clear, no wind, but cold. The cook had found the milk frozen. And Brian had coughed alarmingly all night. That was what had made her remember to rub him. He felt better now?

Yes. He pushed his cheek into the pillow—hers, for it smelled of her hair—and tried to tell her what she meant to him, tried to put into words the emotions of that moment when he had struggled up from another world, painfully, and her soft voice had banished terror so that he could close his eyes again, comforted, loved. The attempt was no more successful than a clumsy and passionless language would allow, but Eleanor understood. Was that not part of her preciousness? She threw whatever it was she had in her hand across a chair and sat down on the bed beside him; and they mumbled to each other for a long, lazy, quiet while. He remembered now how warm and comfortable the room had been, the band of sunshine that made a gorgeous splash on the rug, and how reluctantly he had left this great contentment. Eleanor had helped him button his coat, had flicked his eagle lightly—a half-amused, half-regretful gesture that thrust a night into the past for ever—before she lifted her head. It had been agony then to think of the empty house on the Long Lane . . .

Now he let his horse amble toward it unguided while he protested that, however appropriate to the day, it was not amusing to have a conscience ; and damned the race of bell-ringers fervidly. For he loved Eleanor as he had never loved any woman, as he could never love any other woman ; and she loved him and they had done nothing, nothing, that should make him feel like a particularly loathsome debauchee staggering home through the calm and holy sunshine of a Sunday morning from the bedroom of a particularly white virgin. He was not the one nor was Eleanor the other, nor had the idea ever occurred to him on any of the other mornings. It was a conscience ; it was annoying, it was exasperating, it was inexplicable by anyone save Louis of Basil. So he wheeled his horse around Roland's pillar and headed determinedly toward the house on Vintners Lane.

There Garth told him Louis had not yet returned from the cathedral, whither he had gone creaking in every limb and cursing God. His rheumatism, yes. Francis ? The old steward shrugged. Francis had gone with some officers and women to Ruby's Camp immediately after the review yesterday and had not been home since. Elizabeth was in her room ; should he—— Brian told him not to, refused breakfast, refused coffee, and threw himself into a chair. The house became quiet again, the Sunday morning quiet he remembered.

People moved in remote parts of the house ; in the kitchen where meat was roasting, in the cellar where Garth was selecting wines for dinner, above stairs, out in the stables. Ten years before Sunday mornings were noticeable for this same hush everywhere, by this quiet preparation as for a ceremony going on within the house, by the lack

of any sound whatever from the street, by the lowered curtains and the subdued light they filled every room, every hallway, with. Nothing had changed ; the very furniture was where it had been all these years ago. There was an air of solidity, of tradition, here, of something which had reached perfection and which nothing could change. It was something that had been created, that once had not been but now was, and was, he reflected, almost immortal. The coat-of-arms above the fireplace did not completely nor satisfyingly symbolise it, for Brian. Above his own fireplace was a shield, crest and motto quite as expertly carved from one solid block of wood and equally impressive. There was, however, not much else.

The house on the Long Lane belonged to him but it was nearly impossible to imagine this as belonging to anyone. Rather one belonged to it, was a part of it, the House of Basil. Here, he felt, it would be the most natural thing in the world to awaken and find a pretty woman moving diaphanously through bars of sunlight, every morning. Here you rose early on Sunday and rode to the cathedral and prayed for your own soul and the souls of those dear to you ; and came home for a dinner of many courses. And in the afternoon you rode sedately around the Square if the weather was fine ; or stayed at home and read a book or talked with the others if it was not. There were, in short, certain things expected of you and you did them and you were rewarded by belonging, by being so much a part of other people's lives that it did matter very much if you were not home for dinner. Living ceased to be an irrational, wasteful succession of days with no particular end or meaning. Around this essence, this impalpable but very sturdy core

which was the House of Basil, its past, its history, its family customs and the things it expected of you – around this your living took on substance and continuity, became shaped into a life, so that you could look back beyond yesterday or the day before. The contemporaneous emotions might be pleasant or not ; the point was that you did not feel so lost, so adrift ; you could put out your hand and touch your past ; something did, it seemed to Brian, show.

Thus, seated in Louis of Basil's library, fingering a just discernible scratch in a chair-arm, Brian realised the least amusing thing of all ; and it was so preposterously unamusing that he rose and went up to Elizabeth's room, dumbfounded.

Her old nurse blinked at him, then croaked back over a shoulder. Elizabeth's voice said : ' Oh ! Come in, Brian.'

Sunlight mellowed by deeply yellow curtains filled the room. He moved through it waist-deep toward an Elizabeth clad in a gold and crimson wrapper out of which she lifted a bare, slender arm. After he had kissed her hand and sat down on a small stool opposite her she closed her book and smiled at him. ' What are you doing here at this hour ?'

' I came to see Louis but it will wait. What are you reading ?'

' A book of old plays.'

' Ah. Good reading. I must get you the best of the lot, *Tamburlaine the Great*.'

' Daniel gave me a copy months ago and told me I must like it or his heart would break. Now when I go into his shop he becomes Bajazeth on the instant ; the rafters tremble with blank verse and blood flows like water.'

‘It is a tremendous thing.’ He swept her with his eyes again. ‘Do all dark-haired women favour yellow dressing-gowns?’

‘This is maize, not yellow. Why?’

He waved a hand. ‘Oh, nothing. Eleanor has one something like that.’

‘How is Eleanor?’

‘Very well.’ Then he added gloomily: ‘I am thinking of marrying her.’

Elizabeth smiled. ‘You seem overjoyed. But are you sure she would have you?’

‘I have just spent the night with her.’

‘Simpleton!’

He groaned and clutched his head. ‘I know. But I have just discovered I have a conscience. That is why I came to see Louis, for it is partly his fault.’

‘Louis’s? How could it be?’

‘You mean he has none?’

‘That was not what I meant but it will do. So you have a conscience and it is troubling you? My poor Brian! Does Eleanor know?’

He shook his head. ‘Not yet. Should I tell her?’

‘It is not very wise, is it, nor very mannerly to tell a woman that her presence in the same bed with you defiles your soul? No, decidedly you must not tell her. You must learn to practise deceit. Heavens! what it is to have a conscience.’ She laughed with her head thrown back; she had a lovely throat.

‘Yes, you are very fortunate.’

‘I?’

‘It is not really conscience, Elizabeth.’ He scratched his chin a trifle ruefully. ‘It just occurred to me while I was sitting down in the library that it would be nice to have sons. Yes, a home, you

understand, and a wife and two or three sons. And perhaps a girl or two ; three boys and two girls would be about right, I think. A peculiar idea for me to get, eh ? ’

Elizabeth murmured : ‘ You are just at that age.’ She was drawing the collar of her wrap close over a triangle of flesh and lace ; one hand held it thus while she looked at him in silence.

He avoided her eyes. ‘ I never wanted sons – children – before. And then again it is not really children I want. Oh, Lord, I do not know what I want.’

She repeated : ‘ You are just at that age.’

He knew perfectly well what he was doing. He yawned, elaborately. ‘ Louis should be getting home soon.’ He scratched his knee. ‘ I wonder why Sunday is always such a long day.’ He began to rise. ‘ I do not think I shall wait for him.’

Elizabeth’s hand fell slowly into her lap. ‘ Why not stay for dinner ? ’

‘ No – not to-day. How do you like my eagle ? ’

‘ It was time you had one. Francis got one too.’

‘ Yes, I know.’ He polished it with his sleeve, drawled a long, apologetic ‘ Well——’ kissed her hand and left. At the head of the stairs he paused, conscience-stricken. ‘ I really ought to go back and tell her – she will probably worry herself sick wondering how much I know.’ He hesitated, then shrugged and went on down.

‘ Still——’ he thought, wrestling with his coat ; and stared thoughtfully at a bronze statuette. It sat in a niche in the library wall, a plump, polished nude with hands in lap and head drooping. He sighed and went back up the stairs.

He saw that she had not moved. The book still lay in her lap and her eyes looked unseeingly across the

flat bareness of the Royal Square. Her head turned slowly.

‘I came back to tell you – does it matter much? – that I saw you and Peter that afternoon.’

‘What afternoon?’

‘Are there more than one already? The afternoon of the hunt.’

She seemed to slip a little deeper into her chair.

‘I was wondering – I am glad you told me.’

‘It means nothing to me, you understand?’

She nodded. He asked: ‘You love him?’

She said: ‘Yes. Yes, I love him.’

He said nothing for a moment. Then: ‘This is something even Louis had not counted on. When will you tell him?’

‘I do not know.’ Her voice was absolutely toneless.

‘Have you told Peter anything?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What a mess! How in heaven’s name do you expect it to end?’

Her hands rose from her lap, then fell again. ‘There can be only one ending. We really do love each other, you see.’

‘Is that all that matters?’

‘That is all.’

She watched a coach crawl very slowly along the far edge of the Square and after a while she went on: ‘I am not afraid. It is mingled joy and pain and it may bring sorrow, but it is love and I must cling to it.’

He swung his hat back and forth. ‘But – I mean even a love affair can be taken – well, sensibly, you understand – and it looks like such an awful mess——’ He stopped.

She did not call him an idiot. ‘I thought of all

that long ago. At the beginning I fought against it because it might be that I did not want Peter so much as a lover. How could I know then? But I know now.'

'You seem very sure.'

She smiled. 'I am.'

He swore softly. The immobility of her broke as she turned on him. 'I am flesh and blood but I am also more, and I demand more. You are just discovering what I always knew, that there is something which cannot be taken sensibly, which is worth wading to through the worst kind of a mess. If I were you I would marry Eleanor and get those sons and daughters.'

'Oh, yes, to be sure.' He began putting on his hat. 'Nevertheless I do not think it will be so simple as all that.'

'It will not be simple, it will be horrible. But it is worth everything; it is, believe me, the only thing left. You would do no less.'

'Would I? I suppose so - I do not know. Well - if I can ever be of any use——' he says.

Then he went away and rode to his own house.

CHAPTER XV

HIS house was on the Long Lane, the second from the Square on the left, a narrow building of dark red brick with five windows and a steeply-pitched roof like a hat at a riotous angle. Its door was its only ornament, a treasure of architectural wood-work dating from the previous century, the joy and despair of every student who came up out of the depths of the Long Lane with pencil and sketch book. Further south the Lane deteriorated lamentably into a welter of bad inns, bakeshops, garrets and holes dealing in the personal effects of the starving and the dead, but here it was still a pleasant, quiet place. The pavements were kept clean, the houses were of a recognisable architecture and their owners usually respectable. The most notable was returning from the cathedral as Brian arrived, the owner of the white mausoleum on the corner, Duke Peter. Brian saluted him, bowed to Her Grace and smiled at their big-toothed daughter, a lanky virgin who was forced to go about boasting that she would never marry. The duke cursed asthmatically as he got out of his coach and Honoria – the daughter – displayed for Brian's edification a very bony ankle. Then the quiet of Sunday afternoon settled over the Lane once more, a somewhat dreary quiet compounded of deserted sidewalk and blank walls and shuttered windows and cold sunshine. The sunshine and the clean blue sky would hold, no doubt, and within another two hours the Square would be filled with glittering coaches and digesting

dinners. There would be gossip, echoes of dinner-table arguments, flirtations, many fine horses and a splendid opportunity to display a silver eagle, honourably earned. So another Sunday afternoon could be endured. But he had forgotten to ask Eleanor if she would be out and anyway he preferred to stay indoors.

Which, once he had entered the famous door, he did, reading till dusk in the quarto Daniel had recommended; the record set down by his own hand in his old age of the travels and adventures in strange lands of one Latrenay the Younger. He had a light supper and went to bed early. He forgot to rub his chest, slept poorly and awoke thinking of Eleanor.

If Sunday's air, its character, is unmistakable for any other, Monday's is no less so; and peering out of his window at a grey, lowering sky, Brian acknowledged it. The squares and lanes of the city rumbled with traffic, shops were open, a great number of people hurried in thoughtful abstraction from here to there. There was something to do for everyone, and no better day than Monday, he reflected, could be imagined for coming to an understanding with one's self and beginning, in a really serious way, something worth while. The very air demanded it. Evening was the time for pleasure, morning for doing things. He watched a heavily-loaded wagon careen up the lane. He had been too long neglectful of the dearest of all worthwhile things. The wagon swayed drunkenly as it turned the corner. A love for literature and learning overwhelmed him; he remembered the hours he could have spent in the high company of genius and groaned with remorse while he dressed in sober black and white as was befitting. After poached

eggs, buttered toast and two cups of coffee he visited Daniel.

Daniel presided over Prester John's Head, the best bookshop in the city. He was a retired poet with a lingering taste for political intrigue, a taste he nowadays indulged by printing the screeds of the more imaginative and spectacular plotters at almost cost price. The press in the cellar had been lately installed at terrific expense to Beverly and a group of literary gentlemen – Brian was a charter member – and it groaned by the hour over seditious pamphlets, the sheets of Beverly's paper *The Triumverate* and choice erotica by his wealthier contributors.

When Brian entered Daniel was in the cellar; he recalled that *The Triumverate* was due in a few days. He shut the door carefully; the diamond-shaped panes of its upper half cut the lane, the passers-by, into segments. Here and there on the walls Daniel had hung small placards done in an antique script by an artist from lower down the lane, and one, from above the alcove labelled 'Poetry,' caught Brian's eye as he passed.

'For books are not absolutely dead things but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve, as in a violl, the purest efficacie and extractions of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, as vigorously productive as those fabulous dragons' teeth; and being sown up and down may chance to spring up armed men. And yet on the other hand unless wariness be used, as good kill a man as kill a good book; who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. For many a man lives a burden to the earth but a good book is

the precious life blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on a purpose to a life beyond life.'

'Those are terrible, great words,' said Brian.

Daniel peered at him over a pile of books. 'They are, my friend, the finest words spoken of books since men first began to waste health and eyesight making them.' He placed the books on a desk and sat down. Brian followed him and hoisted a leg to the desk, comfortably. 'Has anything new come in?'

'No. Business is very bad.'

'I want something to read.'

'You have not finished with Latrenay yet.'

'I admit it. I admit it without shame. Consider: I read how he discovers yet another island whereon his is the first civilised foot to tread, how he slaughters yet another host of monsters which has terrorised the natives and how once again he is rewarded with a harem of giggling, brown-flanked virgins. He regularly distributes his socks as love-charms and proves his civilisation by marrying forty-four women in nine years. I do not find his story hard to believe, you understand. I find it pointless. Such literature is not elevating.'

'Latrenay,' Daniel mused judiciously, 'grows on one. I have found that to be the rule with the best authors. We may say carelessly that we get used to so-and-so's outlandish peculiarities but as a matter of fact we grow up to them. In my own youth I would have fought anyone who dared suggest that I could not read certain admittedly great writers solely because I was too young and callow. But in those days literature was a duty with me, not a business and pleasure as now. And must it be elevating?'

Brian stared out at the lane, at the little of it that

was framed by the shop front. It was filled with a grey murky light, an early morning light that made lamps essential indoors, and through this queer dusk the traffic of the lane, wagons, pedlars, swearing drivers, shoppers, whistling boys, women, went past the bookshop seven deep. Now and then someone would pause to look into Daniel's window – at the old Bible, probably, which Daniel had open at an engraving of Adam and Eve in paradise – and provide a still figure against the lane's noisy and colourful parade. 'Elevating,' says Brian, 'may not be the exact word.' He was silent for a moment. 'Perhaps the word I want is true. Or honest. Useful, certainly, useful to me. I want more than just entertainment.'

The bookseller protested: 'There are many kinds of books and you must not look down on those which are merely entertaining.'

'But it is silly to read a book for entertainment. Almost anything else will provide more of it than a book. Good company, women, music, dining, playing – that is entertainment. A book is learning, knowledge, bread and meat, not cake. You understand.'

'You word it badly. A book is also good company; a good one is like a friend talking. And everyone likes a good story.'

Brian spread out his hands. 'We will say, then, that I at this time want neither a good story nor to hear a friend talking.'

'To avoid generalisations,' says Daniel, 'is to approach wisdom.'

'I want the bread and meat of living, I want books which have something to teach me, something which I will be the better for knowing. I want their authors to tell me with simplicity and truth

what they know, what they have learnt, about themselves and their world. They may tell it in the form that pleases them best, as poetry, biography, fiction or history, but let them hold tenaciously to these, to simplicity and truth. For do you see, Daniel, we have denied our priests and God will not speak ; but our need remains, our dreadful need to know how to live and die. Books may teach us. They must ; there is nothing else left.'

Daniel played with a pen on his desk. ' I myself would not put it quite so strongly. As I grow older I admire more and more the man who first advised us not to believe everything we read. But I have known your trouble. I also was once twenty-odd and slowly discovering that I knew considerably less than I would admit. Growing up is a damnably painful business. Hell,' he said, ' I would not be twenty again for all the money in the world.' He shook his head and grinned a little. ' What a life ! You are nothing but a bundle of moods and emotions ; no stability, no resistance. Everything impinges on you, plays on you, reaches you ; women, beauty, religion, music, a picture, daylight and night-time, the whole bewildering world. You are sensitive to everything, helpless, unable to protect even your own emotions. Almost anything will start you writing odes or contemplating suicide. And you begin to be convinced that you are a genius and will die young. But you live.'

Brian observed : ' Your excursus is entertaining and irrelevant. I do not want to write poetry but to learn how to live.'

Daniel rolled the pen away from him and leaned his chair back. ' And that is something no one can tell you, no one. We are all born alone in this world, alone and very young and very tender. For a while

you are twenty-odd and easily the most helpless and miserable creature alive. Then in sheer self-defence you begin to harden. You are not so sensitive as you once were, you learn not to mind things and to pretend quite successfully that you did not care so much ; your skin gets tough. You lose a lot ; many fine things dull themselves unheeded against that protective cuticle around your soul. It would not be too much to say that you are not so alive, so agonisingly alive, as you once were. You learn to be pretty much what people expect you to be and in the evening to live with yourself ; and you get old more or less comfortably without ever having learned how to live except by chance and makeshift, the first to make a virtue of necessity.'

'You can say that?'

'I can, my friend, and without any very great shame. For you learn to take ever so much on faith. Yes, you come around to faith in the end.'

Brian shook his head again. 'No, I do not think I will. My pride if nothing else would not permit it. I have often apologised to God when I caught myself praying to Him in whom I cannot believe. It is the old instinct and hard to down.'

'A man grows old, learning. You are young ; I would recommend to you the Stoic philosophers – they are in the second alcove on your left – and the writings of Michel de Montaigne.'

'Philosophy? I do not want philosophy. It does not clear matters to label God reason and then retrace step by dreary step the identical road trod by all the rhetoricians, theologians and systemisers since Lucifer.'

'Why,' interestedly, 'why Lucifer?'

'The name was convenient.'

'Oh. Well, as to the systemisers, I agree with you.'

They are all nauseating and their philosophy is gibberish. But what can you expect from an imbecile who locks himself into a room and by intensive cerebration reduces the universe into six volumes, folio, of unreadable prose?’

‘A system of philosophy.’

‘Exactly. Such antics are splendid examples of what the human mind can be made to endure and we may permissibly gape at one of their more eminent practitioners as we gape at a contortionist, that is, as something of an unnatural monster; but they will not teach us how to live. Why, any practising philosopher is horrible proof of this fact; it is proverbially one of that tribe which cannot be trusted to cross the street safely and so obey nature’s primal law. No, avoid the systemisers as you would the plague; their philosophy is nothing but a theology; they would begin with genesis and end with revelation – utter stupidity. Beverly tells me that if religion belongs to the infancy of the human mind then is philosophy the plaything of its adolescence.’

‘For a poet,’ says Brian, ‘Beverly is——’

‘The grown man, my friend, takes the world as he finds it, holds to what little truths he can vouch for and in difficult moments shrugs; for somehow, sometime, it will all balance truly. You come around, as I said, in a wide circle to faith again. You begin, even, to speculate on the possibility that there may be at that a living God. But that is rather soul-shaking stuff; we are not all bishops, used to such terrible company. Upon my soul, there may be the whole secret, that we can never be. Eh?’

‘I am dining with the Cardinal to-night,’ Brian remembered.

‘It is heady stuff. But I still recommend the Stoics, particularly Seneca, and the conversation of Seigneur Montaigne. I have good editions of both and the prices are low.’

‘I have glanced at them off and on ; they appear to be very dry reading.’

‘You will grow up to them by and by.’

Brian grunted and moved to the second alcove on his left. He did not leave until a dull headache began to warn him that it was long past lunch time. Daniel accepted five crowns for a Seneca, translated by Sir Roger L’Estrange and a Florio Montaigne in three squat volumes, without needless comment.

He lunched at home on onion soup and an omelette and then read in first one and then the other of his purchases, frowning continuously. At four he closed both and for an hour practised some new music Elizabeth had sent him and worked on the melody for one of Beverly’s lyrics. With this he had two glasses of wine and some biscuits. The grey day was shading off into a chilly twilight ; the workers were coming home to supper, flitting past the shop windows in the lane below. By half after six he was bathed and dressed, eagle, sword and new boots conspicuous, and at seven o’clock precisely – Eleanor had not kept him waiting long – he was kissing the plump hand of Lady Anne Praen, whose house was on Bent Lane, whose husband was Commander in the Field (by Louis of Basil’s grace) of the King’s Army and whose cook was the best in the city. He had been indoors all day, he told her, and he wanted company and a good dinner.

CHAPTER XVI

EVENING was the time for pleasure . . . and it was with a sedate sort of pleasure that Brian had helped Eleanor into her coach and sat beside her while the horses took them the longest way around the Square to Bent Lane. The coach struck the flagstones of the Square and rolled smoothly ; as they passed the King's Road he glimpsed its lamplit pavement and straggling traffic ; then the sombre façades of residences and spiked garden walls began again and they rode through darkness, except for the street lamps which at each corner made the window glow and slide a pale rectangle down Eleanor's furs to the floor and up the wall of the coach to oblivion. He watched everything gravely, as if he were seeing it all for the first time, a Brian dressed in his best and sobered by the responsibility of escorting Eleanor to a cardinal's birthday dinner.

It was a dinner he ordinarily would not have classified as diverting and gone some lengths to avoid, but to-night its very polite conversation and unexciting formality appealed to a mood with which Seneca and Montaigne may have had something to do but which was mostly Eleanor. Sitting beside her he felt the need of maturity and dignity to match her serene perfection, and for the first time in his life envied any man his manner. Louis of Basil even snored in the grand style.

Eleanor sat in her corner, deep in her furs, white-gloved hands clasped primly ; when their eyes met she smiled at him and he smiled back. Neither spoke.

At Praen's she walked slowly up the steps while Brian told the coachman to return at eleven. The evening was cold and silent with only a few stars above the city. A servant was holding the door open and Eleanor was a wide-skirted silhouette against it, looking back, waiting for him to join her.

Lady Praen said, in the large hall with its painted ceiling and heavy bronze lanterns: 'You two? What are you two doing here?'

Brian felt his arm touch Eleanor's as they faced her. 'You invited us.'

'But I never thought you would come. Lovers like you are expected by all good hostesses to stay at home.'

'Stop teasing him, Anne. Do you like my dress now?'

'Oh,' says Brian, 'is that a new dress?'

Eleanor and Lady Praen looked at each other in smiling despair. 'Well,' Brian protested, 'it looks a lot like the one she wore the other night.'

Eleanor shook his arm. 'Must everyone know?'

'Brian, you had better keep still. Eleanor got that dress for this dinner.'

They moved toward the drawing room, which was large, white and very warm. 'Praen was called away suddenly; Basil is having a meeting of some sort at his house. I suppose that is why Elizabeth is not here though she promised to come. Did she say anything to you, Brian?'

'Not when I saw her last.'

'And when was that?'

'Sunday morning.'

Eleanor's head turned. 'Yesterday?' He nodded and she asked: 'What were you doing there?'

'I wanted to see Louis but he had gone to mass.'

Someone was playing the piano lazily; several

gentlemen were draped about it and several more about the bowl of mulled wine which stood near one of the windows. The long purple curtains were drawn close. Brian nodded to those he knew as eyes lifted to follow him and Eleanor across the room. She was not the youngest woman present – the red-haired girl at the piano was younger – but she was easily the most beautiful. He was very proud of her.

His Eminence stood near the fireplace, a man of fifty, handsome, ruddy, episcopally plump. He had a ruby ring on one hand and a glass of wine in the other and he bore unflinchingly the adoration of five ladies whose combined ages totalled two hundred and eighty-eight years. ‘Thank you,’ he says to Brian, ‘and I feel every day of it when I look at you. You men of war,’ he says – Brian’s was one of the few uniforms in the room – ‘fill me with envy. Envy is unchristian but we are all sinners. Take away your eagle and your sword, sir, before I forget that I am not built for tight breeches and a saddle.’

‘Oh, your Eminence!’ the ladies cried.

‘Though once – when I was younger—— But I chose another King’s service, as you see.’

‘And who can say that you chose wrongly, sir? Not we who may ride away but must come back to you at last.’

‘You are very kind; and you are too young to be thinking of such things. Leave them for old men like me.’

The matrons’ mouths made five round O’s, but no sound issued. Brian says: ‘Perhaps it is because I have been reading philosophy all day and my mind is still full of it.’

‘Philosophy?’ The dark eyes settled on him.

‘ Seneca and Montaigne.’

‘ And what do you want with philosophy, young soldier ? ’

‘ To learn how to live, sir.’

‘ That is a good thing to learn and not easy.’ He stared at Brian speculatively. ‘ Seneca and Montaigne ? They have something to say, yes.’ He glanced at his wine. ‘ Though I should think that at your age you would learn more from the nightingales and larks than from the bald old eagles.’

‘ But living is mostly prose, sir.’

‘ I like your wit. Well,’ he says, ‘ may I offer my help when the lesson becomes hard ? ’

‘ Thank you.’

His ruby burned for a moment, then darkened ; he had turned to Eleanor. She had not been to see him since her return ; was that kind ? Eleanor made excuses. ‘ I will forgive you if you come soon ; and bring our young philosopher when you do.’

Eleanor promised and they left him to his worshippers. She squeezed Brian’s arm. ‘ You impressed him tremendously, Brian. You even impressed me.’

‘ You hardly know me,’ he says complacently.

They paused before a woman of thirty or so, obviously married to the bald man at her side, plump-shouldered, bejewelled, a mouth like a loose wound. ‘ For heaven’s sake ! ’ This from Eleanor.

The wound gaped. ‘ Well ! ’

‘ You poor soul, how thin you are getting ! ’

‘ Eleanor, for God’s sake do not remind me of it.’

‘ You deserve to be punished for not coming to my dinner. After two years one would imagine——’

‘ Eleanor, you know very well——’ And she

explained for five minutes in a voice that seemed always on the point of getting beyond her control. Then : ' What is Brian following you around for ? '

' Brian ? Oh ! Isn't he a nuisance ? '

The two women inspected him in the way women have. Brian grinned and said nothing ; the bald husband stared morosely at the Cardinal's stomach. ' He says he loves me,' Eleanor explained.

' And you believe him ? '

' What can a poor girl do ? Look, he is even holding my hand so I should not run away.'

' My heart bleeds for you, you poor child, though not very much, because that is the most marvellous gown——'

And so on. Very much in this fashion they made a complete circuit of the room. Eleanor seemed to have been intimate at one time or another with every woman there, and before each one she paraded Brian with a quite unconcealable pride in him. That she should evince it indirectly, by pretending that he was at once a nuisance she must put up with and a seducer she was helpless against was part of a game everyone understood and played with her, Brian included. This, a drawing-room, was pre-eminently woman's ground. There were no close friends of his own about to flaunt Eleanor before, but even so that curious humility, that need of something to match her perfumed and golden-gowned loveliness kept him, in the background while she laughed and talked. It was not the only thing he might have done but it was probably the best ; and Eleanor was enjoying herself. That was enough for him.

His own deepest pleasure of the evening came when dinner was announced and under cover of the talk from the head of the table he ate a large quantity

of excellent food and then played with Eleanor's hand in drowsy content. She chatted interminably with the old gentleman on her left and the woman across the table ; Brian could not make head or tail of their conversation and fell to changing Eleanor's rings from one finger to another. The Cardinal appeared to be telling the story of his life. Brian replaced the rings on their original fingers – a prodigious labour – and squeezed Eleanor's hand. She immediately looked at him. 'What did you say ?'

'Nothing. I simply wanted you to look around.'

'You have made my hand all damp.' She applied a kerchief to its palm and fingers and Brian resumed possession. 'How much longer must we sit here ?'

'Hush ! Not much longer.'

But Brian had finished another glass of wine before Lady Praen rose. In the drawing room, while Eleanor and Lady Praen went upstairs, Brian joined the group of young people that had earlier clustered about the piano. They were now attendant upon the mulled wine ; the elderly gentlemen who had guarded the bowl before were securely anchored, torpid with food and wine, to their respective wives. The red-haired girl put down her own glass and offered Brian one. 'Did you bring your flute, Brian ?'

He refused the wine and says, peevishly : 'It is a flageolet.'

'Did you bring it ?'

'Of course not.'

'You should have. The Cardinal is going to play for us but I like your music better.'

He grinned. 'If I played would you dance ?'

'I would not.'

'Brian, have you heard about Francis ?'

‘Heard what?’

‘They say he raised seven kinds of it down at the camp the night of the review.’

‘Well,’ says Brian, ‘that is probably what he went down there for. What of it?’

‘Nothing. I just wondered if you had heard.’

Someone else said: ‘Not been down there for a while yourself, have you, Brian?’

‘Not lately.’

‘Brian is getting old.’

The girl laughed. ‘It is not age; it is his widow who is keeping Brian home at nights.’

Brian says calmly: ‘I know damned well what keeps you away, red-head.’

The young men did not know, so they asked. Brian told them they were too young to be hearing such things and went in search of Eleanor, leaving the girl to evade questions with flippancies. He found Eleanor and a corner where they could sit undisturbed as the Cardinal disappeared behind a wall of women and the piano. His Eminence was obliging with a second chorus of ‘Not a Tear Was In Her Eye’ (having already ravished the matrons with ‘O Fair Was Helen’) when Eleanor jogged her lover’s elbow. ‘We will be leaving soon; do try to look happy, Brian.’

Brian put his arm around her and crossed his knees. ‘I would,’ he admitted, ‘rather be alone with you.’ He beat time with his foot. ‘They tell me Francis has been raising hell down at Ruby’s Camp.’

‘Ruby’s Camp? That is that place outside the Queen’s Gate?’

‘Yes.’ He glanced at her. ‘Were you ever there?’

‘No. I have heard a lot about it, though.’

‘ Most of what you heard is true.’

‘ I suppose you know.’

He grunted.

Out on the steps, waiting for their coach, Brian sniffed the cold air gratefully and said : ‘ Well, that is all over. So you were never at Ruby’s Camp ? ’

CHAPTER XVII

FOR, be it repeated, evening was the time for pleasure; and – as Brian told Eleanor, following her into the coach – it was too confounded early to think of going home. Which was part but not all the reason for his sudden restlessness. The red-haired girl had awakened memories – he realised with a slight shock that they were memories – of extraordinary poignancy; the very smell and feel of those roaring nights came back, and while the Cardinal was tinkling through ‘O Fair Was Helen’ he wallowed in nostalgia. Nothing, it seemed to him, nothing could surpass in loveliness the loveliness of those journeys back at sunrise, when even the women were still and they rolled across a hushed countryside through dew and a cool wind and the far-reaching greyness of morning drenched with fall. It was a loveliness unobtainable in any other way, one reserved for those who had not been home all night, who had been drunk at midnight but were sober now, singing then but quiet now, sinners, drunkards, hellions full of sweet repentance in a cathedral roofed by heaven. And then – it may have been no more than a revulsion against cardinals’ birthday dinners in general – he had a momentary vision of his youth slipping away, being buried under the fine sifting powder of unexciting formalities and polite conversations without end. He had dismissed the prophetic tableau instantly but it had lasted long enough to make a formal end to this formal evening, going home – even with Eleanor

— impossible. To-morrow morning, when he came out on the porch of the White Star, yawning — it would end then.

After her first somewhat surprised ‘No,’ muffled by her furs, Eleanor had said nothing. She did not even trouble to agree, vocally, that it was too early to go home. She got into the coach and when Brian told the driver to go to the Long Lane she said : ‘I would rather not stay long, Brian.’

He informed her that she was not to get out of the coach. ‘Then why,’ she asked, ‘are we going there?’

‘For my flageolet.’

‘And then?’

‘The Camp.’

She eyed him in silence. In three minutes they were before his own door and in three more he had been up and was back down, spilling flageolet, biscuits and wine-glasses into Eleanor’s lap. He had a bottle of wine in one hand and he pointed west with it as he directed the coachman, his voice echoing down the quiet lane. Then he got in beside her and Eleanor asked, for no obvious reason, ‘Would you go without me?’

He answered truthfully : ‘I would to-night. But you are coming with me.’

‘I shall have to, I suppose, just to make sure that you keep out of trouble.’

‘Trouble? There will be no trouble. Where are those glasses?’ He began to search in Eleanor’s lap and she promptly slapped his hand. He said it was too damned dark. She said, Yes, she had noticed it, and held the glasses under his nose. He filled them, set the bottle on the floor between his ankles and put an arm around her. She gave him a cake before he could start a search for one and he pointed this

forethought out to her. Eleanor said : ' It all depends on how a girl is brought up. Some are and some are not, and in that case what can you expect ? '

Brian pondered this with due gravity. ' Yes,' he says, ' that is true.' As they passed by Vintners Lane he saw a number of coaches standing before the Basil house, the horses on three legs apiece and the coachman asleep. The three large windows of Louis's library showed cracks of light. ' Louis's council is still in session,' Brian commented.

Eleanor peered over his shoulder. ' Is it ? '

' Yes.'

This seemed to satisfy her. The coach left the Square, sped along the western wall of the palace gardens to the Queen's Road and then west to the Gate. It rolled thunderously through the middle arch ; as it went down the slight grade outside, an empty wine bottle whirled out of the window, glinting in the moonlight. When the coach stopped at the Camp Eleanor got out and wept. ' Look at my dress ; just look at my dress.'

But the wind was too bitter for much standing with cloak open so Eleanor pulled it about her and inspected the Camp interestedly. They were in a small courtyard facing a U-shaped building of grey stone, two stories high and a little larger than the usual residence. A double balcony extended along the entire front of it ; one lamp burned above the door in the middle and sent queer streaks of light and shadow along the lower porch. All the windows were heavily shuttered ; there was no sign of life anywhere. Smoke from the two chimneys was torn into shreds as it came up, for the wind was blowing unchecked from the rolling, empty plains to the north and west. The sky was lighter than the earth.

The current Messer Ruby, a bull-necked man with a deep respect for the military, welcomed them into his dining-room, which was almost empty, and assured Brian there was a table for him in the left wing, which was not. It appeared to contain half the army. The uproar was deafening.

Eleanor clung to Brian's arm. 'Good heavens, what a din !'

'They quiet down later.'

Midway down the room Francis rose from a table and stepped into the aisle, pulling a girl Brian did not recognise after him. He was in uniform but his coat was open and his face unshaven that day. For a moment he and Brian stood face to face. Then : 'Hello.'

'Good evening.'

Francis looked at Eleanor. His teeth flashed. 'You will excuse me, will you not, for remembering certain high-minded words of yours? Surely. I think you will find this even duller than I promised.' He put his arm around the girl. 'Only unwholesome weeds like Chloris and myself flourish here, rankly. Come along, girl. She vomits easily,' Francis explained, and pulled the girl past.

Eleanor looked at Brian. 'Is he drunk?'

'Not very. Forget him.'

They reached their table. Brian snared a waiter, ordered food and wine. Beverly stopped to slap him on the back and to tell Eleanor that she was beautiful. She thanked him prettily. The poet said : 'Irene had a headache to-night, God be praised,' and rolled away singing. Others, men from his barracks mostly, came and went less informally ; each had two eyes, a smile and a stiff bow for Eleanor. Their manners were superb and unconvincing.

Dishes and bottles appeared. Brian said : ' Try some of this salad ; you will find it really very good. You remember the red-haired girl at the piano ? '

Eleanor's head turned to where an ancient piano was being maltreated discordantly. ' I mean Praen's. '

' Oh. That was her mother pawing at the Cardinal all evening, the thin woman in grey silk ? '

' Was it ? '

' Charleroi's wife. '

' Anyhow, the last time the red-head was down here – about three months ago – she lost all her clothes. '

' Heavens ! ' Eleanor lowered her fork. ' How on earth did she get home ? '

' In a cloak and a coach. '

' Who brought her ? '

' Your gallant Brian. '

Eleanor resumed eating. ' Oh. '

' She is a wild child – no sense at all – but good-hearted. '

Eleanor buttered a piece of bread. ' Why do I always get butter on my thumb when I butter a piece of bread ? How could she lose all her clothes ? '

' Not all of them. Just her dress and a couple of petticoats. '

' I should think that would be enough. '

' She had drunk more than was good for her and she wanted to dance – there is always some woman who decides she wants to dance on a table – and she said her dress was too hot. So she took it off. '

' And danced ? '

' And danced. '

' On a table ? '

' Yes. You see where that girl in the green dress is sitting ? On that table. '

Eleanor watched the girl in the green dress lean

down to kiss lingeringly a young man in a white uniform. 'And what were you doing here?'

'I used to come here once in a while but that night I came because Irene wanted to see the place. I may be wrong but I think that was when she first took a liking to Beverly. He was sober that night. He brought her home, I know.'

'And you brought the red-haired girl.'

'Well, her own escort was unconscious and in a way I was responsible for her trouble. I played while she danced. I have a special tune for such dances.' He looked at Eleanor and chuckled. 'Sometime I will play it for you.'

'I suppose you think I will get on a table and dance.'

'Did I say so?'

'But you thought it.'

'I was thinking of my music, which has been tested by time and usage.'

'Then I shall tell Marna not to let you in if you are carrying your flageolet. And besides,' says Eleanor, 'my hair is not red.'

'For which I thank heaven daily. Red-haired women are fishes.'

'Did you find it out that night?'

'I always knew it. Is that your foot?'

'Stop before you tear my stocking. Who was the girl Francis had?'

Brian shrugged. 'I have no idea.' He drank from his glass. 'So he tried to bring you here, eh?'

'Yes.'

'And you refused?'

She nodded. 'Why? Partly him and partly the place itself. You understand.'

'And now?'

Eleanor smiled. 'Well, what about now?'

'Nice girl.'

'Nice boy.'

A detachment from the piano swooped down on Brian demanding music. He drove them away. 'Later,' he says, 'you see I am busy.' For Eleanor had been moved to reveal that the gown had been altered since she wore it last. This proved to be so and Brian mourned the disappearance of several creases. 'But a cardinal's dinner, Brian!' She made a face at him. 'Here they come again.'

Thenceforth, in everything save that it was a flushed and excited Eleanor at his side rather than some other woman, the night went the way and in the manner of all such nights; on a wave of noise, wine and kisses and for the most part pleasantly. There was the usual quarrel in a corner and the usual girl was carried upstairs; and Beverly, half drunk, recited a poem. He hiccupped and gestured an ode on friendship into burlesque that was not very funny until Eric pulled him off his feet. As the poet tumbled Brian heard Eric ask him if he wanted his head bashed in. 'By whom?' asked the poet. 'By me, you god-damned idiot,' says Eric. Beverly pillowed his head on a girl's crossed ankles and closed his eyes. So much Brian, engrossed with Eleanor, noticed; afterward he wished he had noticed Francis also. But he did not see Francis again until - almost to the hour - six days later.

Meanwhile someone had started to sing a love song; and time's pendulum hung poised between yesterday and to-morrow; and he knew he had eaten and drunk too much. And Eleanor was saying: 'Pooy! your breath smells of wine. Let me go, you drunken brute.'

And later: 'Take me home, Brian.'

CHAPTER XVIII

HE was mildly surprised to find it still dark outside ; he had forgotten that the sun rose late in winter. ' I am cheated of my ride back through a lifting dawn ; I forgot the sun rises late in winter,' were the words that formed in his mind but never passed his lips. Talk, the elementary mechanics of human speech, had become a herculean labour and a nuisance. He wanted nothing so much as to be let alone. Yet though his jaws felt immovable his mind was clear and lively. When Eleanor said : ' I smell fog. Button your coat ; this air is deadly,' he looked at her stupidly, locked in speechlessness, but his mind replied instantly : ' Yes, there will be a fog. The city will be full of it when we get there. I like foggy mornings. I remember sitting in the White Star one morning eating a really excellent breakfast of fish and eggs when someone came in. Through the door you could hardly see the other side of the Square for the fog. It was fine to be eating breakfast on such a morning.' So his mind, pellucid, tireless, made answer gabbily, as chatty and repulsive as – he decided – a newly-wedded embalmer. But Eleanor, who could hardly be expected to know this, called him a bear and pushed him into the coach.

She was asleep when the driver led the horses through the Queen's Gate. The fog had thickened in good earnest but once in the city the going was better. Brian greeted with pleased recognition the little squares which it was his fortune to see only on the rides back from the Camp, when the coachman

took them home the shortest way. Each had its fountain or statue, its ring of rickety stores and wine-shops, its single flickering lantern – this morning haloed by fog – and in none had he ever glimpsed a living soul. They were lost corners of the city whose very existence he almost doubted when he thought of them afterward ; they had the peculiar reality of the places he visited in his dreams. Brian dreamed frequently and mostly enjoyed it.

Not until they turned into Elder Place did he know accurately where they were. He awoke Eleanor and they got out and stood shivering under the emblematic lantern until Marna should open the door. Eleanor leaned against him wearily. ‘I was never so glad to get home.’

‘Did you have a good time?’

‘Did you?’

‘Why – I suppose so.’ He ended a thoughtful silence with a grunt. ‘I am damned if I know.’

‘I am tired and my head aches and there is wine on my dress. It seems hardly worth it.’

‘Are you sorry you went?’

‘Oh, no.’

‘I thought I was enjoying myself. It is remarkable.’ He shifted Eleanor’s weight on his arm. ‘That red-headed girl was right. I am getting old.’

‘Did she say that? When?’

‘No – I remember it was someone else. To-night, at Anne’s. It was one reason I decided to go to the Camp.’

Eleanor stared off into the darkness which Brian persisted in regarding as slightly unnatural. The wind had dropped but the air was still cold. In the drowned Square an odd lamp or two shone feebly through the fog which they could see writhing down the lane toward them, penetrating everything.

The lantern above them floated in it; when they opened their mouths to speak it choked them and when they breathed it bit the throat like acid. It lay on the city housetops deep, obscuring everything, muffling all sound.

‘Where the devil is the girl? Bang that knocker again, Brian.’ Eleanor coughed into her furs. ‘I wish I was in bed. So you went to Ruby’s to recapture lost youth, Brian?’

‘Well, not exactly.’ Then he stirred. ‘What nonsense you are talking.’

‘Am I?’

‘Good lord, one would think I were fifty.’

‘I am twenty-five.’

‘And I am twenty-nine.’

‘And we have discovered that we cannot become younger by behaving childishly.’ She became silent again and in that silence he could hear her breathe and somewhere in the fog the coachman blowing his nose and coughing in a deathly way. ‘Did you notice how polite the men were to me?’

‘Why should they be anything else?’

‘You had nothing to do with it. I never felt such a stranger to my own generation so deeply. They are my own generation.’ Her drawl was pronounced. She spoke very slowly, as if it were an effort, as though she were going to sleep on her feet. ‘Brian, he married me and I never had a chance to play. Did you notice the girl in the green dress? I made his friends mine and they were all older than I.’

‘I have noticed that.’

‘I could never join young people as you joined those at the punch bowl and at the piano. They would not accept me. I belonged with the older people, the married people. And yet I am not much older than they, Brian!’

‘You really have not missed much, Eleanor.’

‘I wish I knew. On the way to the Camp I hoped – I wonder now what I did hope for. I sat there and waited and then I realised that it was no use. They knew a widow when they saw one. So they did not tell me any of their dirty stories because they suspected I had probably heard them all before and they refrained from taking all sorts of liberties because I could not be shocked into permitting them. I might envy the girl in the green dress but it was beyond me to imitate her, for I had passed the stage where my own emotions were all the play-things I needed.’

‘I remember Daniel saying something like that. Or was it I who said it to Daniel?’

‘I wanted to slap her after I got through envying her; she was such an empty-headed fool. Couldn’t those men see that she never thought of them at all? They were nothing to her but hands and lips. Erotic little beast.’ Eleanor’s shoulders moved against his arm. ‘There is no help for it, Brian, and there is no going back. We get twenty-five and sensible whether we wish to or not.’

‘No,’ Brian says gravely, ‘we get twenty-nine and aware that someone else can matter much more to us than ourselves.’

She turned a little in his arm, raising her face. ‘Touch your cheek to mine, Brian; feel how cold I am. And tired. Are you tired holding me?’

He bent his head and pressed his cheek against her softer, warmer one. ‘I shall never get tired holding you, Eleanor, never.’ He wanted to tell her that her eyes were like stars but she began to speak again. The fog swirled about them, heavier, damper. Eleanor’s voice was low. ‘I have missed a great deal. . . . Brian, Brian, I have never been permitted to

be noisy and wild and silly when I would have enjoyed it and when I would have been pardoned because I was young and there was time for me to settle down. I have never had a chance to play. She got on a table and danced? I wish I had been her, Brian. I wish I had done that.'

'I think I understand, Eleanor.'

She rubbed her cheek against his. 'Precious child. Now it is too late. Now it would only be silly and vulgar and what is more I would not enjoy it.' She pressed closer into his arms. 'He married me and took me away and for three years I was his wife and the mistress of his house, a doll heavy with dresses, heart and head numb, under a spell. The story of the Sleeping Beauty is more than a pretty fable, Brian. But it took death's kiss to break the spell. I came alive slowly, like a child learning to walk, when he was in his grave.' Eleanor shivered a little. 'He was kind to me but we were always strangers. Even alone with me he was without the least curiosity about what I might be thinking, what I might be feeling.' Her lips brushed Brian's cheek. She murmured: 'Until you came I never dreamed people could laugh in bed.'

Brian stared into the fog, wondering helplessly what there could be for him to say. His Eleanor was an astonishing mixture; there were times when he felt he could trust her knowledge and experience implicitly, when hers, not his, seemed the wiser heart and head; and there were times - New Year's Eve, for instance, and the night she had asked him if boys really did dream of a princess - when she revealed an innocence, a naïveté that moved him profoundly. They were glimpses into her most secret heart, given simply, and they were gifts that troubled him and shook him far more than any

others she had ever made him. They were like a great calamity or a miracle, like God appearing, in the teeth of all human experience, riding a cloud in the open sky. They shocked him out of a comfortable, two-dimensional world wherein he was a lover and Eleanor his mistress into one where, with a horrible sense of dealing in supernal matters, he was above everything a man and she was a woman; where each was a living, actually living, soul and each was, could not help being, the other's heaven or hell. The old theologies spoke of a man and woman becoming one; they were wrong. He saw with appalling clearness that each became two; that he was not any longer Brian alone but Brian and a shimmering, precious something irremovably within him that was Eleanor. Henceforth he could do nothing heedlessly; henceforth, heaven help him, guard and guide him, it mattered enormously what he did and said and thought because he had Eleanor's soul in his keeping. It came to that. He could not evade this great responsibility nor the greater certainty that serving it he was shaping his own destiny, that this was his destiny. He recalled, with no wordable emotions, the Sunday morning in Louis of Basil's library. . . .

Eleanor's weight lifted from his arm. 'Here she is now.' She spoke to Marna and then turned to Brian. 'Are you going directly home?'

'I shall have breakfast at the White Star first.'

She had risen a step above him, into the shelter of the open door. She seemed very tired. 'My most dreadful sister is coming to visit me to-morrow. Did I tell you?'

'You did not.'

'She will stay until Sunday. We detest each other.'

They say her husband has sworn never to touch her again as long as he lives.'

'Is that why you hate her?'

'No - that goes back to the time we kept our linen in the same chest of drawers. I have no idea why I let her come. Possibly because she is so much like our mother. I take after my father.' Eleanor's eyelids drooped and her dark lips curled and she drew her cloak more snugly about her hips. 'She does not approve of lovers. Good night, Brian.'

He caught her arm. 'Do you mean I cannot see you until Sunday?'

'Until Monday.'

'Have you no heart?'

She began to laugh at him openly.

Thus he was cheated of breakfast at the White Star also and so had to be content with garbled and unsatisfactory and strikingly dissimilar reports of what took place there as the fog cleared into daylight. Not that he minded; as he assured Elizabeth, on quite the windiest Thursday of his experience, he had his own troubles.

For with the fog lifting outside the windows and Eleanor lying asleep beside him the understanding had come to him that he, that every man, was his own master; that it was for each man to say what his life should be, that every man was self-made. It had seemed a revelation that must transform his whole life. Every man was self-made, every man had the power to fashion himself after whatever image he most lovingly cherished. This was so; but what was more to the point, there could be no escaping this law, not even through ignorance of it. By his own stupidity or his own wisdom, by his own directed effort or unthinking heedlessness, a man made himself into whatever he was on his death-bed.

He was privileged to contemplate there in completeness, as a whole, his own handiwork ; not his ancestors', not fate's, not any human or divine craftsmanship but his own. He could see it all then ; and he could curse God if he had the breath for it or thank Him with a sigh, but surely he of all still living men must realise the futility of either. For he had at last arrived at the knowledge that all his life long God had left him strictly to his own affairs. And this, Brian thought, must be the most dreadful knowledge a man could learn.

What was the answer ? Brian did not know. Religion, philosophy, love, work - words, words. The need was for something to guide one's self by, something to work forward to, something to show at the end. He had lifted his hands and in the half-twilight that filled the room looked at them with a queer sort of terror. With only two hands, a heart and a head, what had not man done ! There was exulting pride in his eyes but the pride did not last long and he unclenched his fists. In the end he fell asleep murmuring into Eleanor's hair : ' At least I know there is something wrong and that something can be done.' That was all he could feel sure of then.

CHAPTER XIX

IT seemed that the three of them, reeking with the surliness which is the prerogative of men who have not yet breakfasted, had had words. Beverly had said something to Francis, or Francis had said something to Beverly and Eric, looking up from his coffee, had answered ; and Francis had forthwith apologised ; or maybe it had been Beverly who had apologised. No one seemed to know exactly and Brian gave up trying to find any sense or meaning in the affair. He caught Beverly pulling proof sheets beside the press in Daniel's cellar but the poet refused to talk. Francis had disappeared. Brian crossed the Square on a remarkably windy afternoon, so bright and crisp that it might have been a Sunday, and found Elizabeth dressing to go out. She could tell him only that Louis had ordered Francis to the military school at Clover Plains, probably to get sober. Brian sprawled in a thin-legged chair, sword between knees, heels digging into a plush cherub, and watched Elizabeth rouge her lips. 'Is it very cold out ?' she asked.

He glanced at the windows, bright with winter sunshine. 'Cold and windy. Where are you going ?'

'To the palace. Young Roland has something the matter with him.'

'Sick ?'

'A cold, I suppose.'

'Are you going alone ?'

'No——' She named several women. Brian

looked at the windows again ; the houses on the other side of the Square were just visible, a dark line along the lower edge, leaving the rest of the glass all blue sky and Roland's pillar. A clear, cold, windy day, good for riding a horse and coming home at dusk, hungry. 'I suppose Peter will be there.'

'Yes.'

'Still in love?'

'From my head to my feet. How is Eleanor?'

From her head to her feet she was dressed in black velvet, with white fur at her throat, her ankles and the wrists of her tight sleeves. Brian said: 'Her sister is visiting her this week.'

"Poor——" says Elizabeth, touched her upper lip with her littlest finger's tip, and finished: '-you.'

'I took her down to Ruby's the other night. Francis was there with some girl.'

'Yes, Louis told me.' She began to put on a velvet cap. 'Have a good time?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

He shrugged as much as was possible in his position. 'I am getting old.'

Elizabeth cocked her head before the mirror. She answered abstractedly: 'Are you?'

'Yes.'

The hat and a stubborn curl of black hair were giving her trouble. After a minute she says: 'Yes what?'

'Yes, I am getting old.'

'Oh! Nonsense. That is merely Eleanor working on you. Marry the girl, Brian.'

'Marriage? No, marriage is not the answer.'

'The answer to what?'

He stared gloomily at Elizabeth's black-stockinged ankles. 'I wish I knew.'

She was getting into her coat when Louis came in. He had just come from the palace, he said. The boy was resting easier. Some women were waiting for Elizabeth in the library. She exclaimed: 'Then I must hurry!' picked up her gloves and left.

Louis approached the fire and warmed his hands. His cheeks were ruddy from the wind, his beard whiter than ever and his clothes black velvet, with a generous show of white linen at the throat and wrists. He turned his back to the fire and eyed Brian, who was thinking that his father was as handsome an old gentleman as could be found anywhere. 'So,' says Louis, 'you were not at the White Star?'

'No.'

'But you were down at Ruby's.'

'Yes.'

'Enjoy yourself?'

'No. I was also at the dinner Lady Praen gave for the Cardinal. I did not enjoy myself much there, either.'

'Well,' says Louis cheerfully, 'such things happen.'

Brian sighed. With his scabbard tip he gouged a cherub in the eye. It occurred to him that Louis had been married and was an old man. 'Louis——'

'Well?'

But it would sound silly to ask what ailed a man when he could not discover what ailed him; and he could hardly ask Louis if he, Brian, wanted to get married. He ventured at last: 'Does marriage change people?'

Louis put his hands behind his back and looked grave. 'Yes,' says he, 'and no.'

Brian sighed even more profoundly. 'That is what I suspected. I think I will go for a ride.'

Louis watched him as he rose to his feet. 'Are you thinking of getting married?'

'Why?' asked Brian, jerking down the brim of his hat.

'Well,' says Louis, 'what else does a man of your age have to think about?'

'Hah!' says Brian portentously.

'You are too young to be taking religion seriously.'

Brian swelled with an erudition Louis was very likely not expecting. 'There is philosophy,' says he.

'To be sure, there is philosophy. I see.' Louis smiled faintly. 'I advise marriage. When you stop writing sonnets to your mistress and begin thinking of her as a human being marriage is really inevitable.'

Brian made an impatient gesture. 'Why do you take it for granted that it is a question of my attitude toward a woman? Is it inconceivable that a man might have other problems?'

'Not at all.' Louis took a large apple from a bowl near him. 'Not at all,' he repeated. 'You are old enough,' says Louis, polishing the apple with the palm of his right hand, 'to be discovering that you are alive in a quite densely populated world and intelligent enough to begin wondering why.' He gazed at the apple speculatively - it was a golden russet - and then bit into it with a loud noise.

'And the answer, I take it, is marriage.'

'Stop talking like an idiot. There is no answer. Marriage simply happens to be the first subject on which you must give your own opinion, make your decision and yourself stand the consequences.'

Naturally you are upset; you have never been called upon to use your mind before.' Louis appeared to be enjoying his apple. 'If you had not spoken of philosophy as if you were casting pearls before swine I might not have been moved to point out to you that we do our living not on a cooling star but in a house on such-and-such a street; and we live not with mankind but with our wives, who very often understand us, and with our neighbours, whose ways are frequently incomprehensible. Young philosophers, drunk with long words, juggling with planets and stars, are apt to forget that.' Louis took another bite. 'You are not, you know, unique. Men have been twenty-five and have thought thoughts before.'

'I am twenty-nine. And what good has it done?'

'Why, they managed to live for forty years after without going mad. Where are you going?'

'I think a ride in this wind and sunshine will do me good.'

'It really is a fine day for this time of the year. Are you forgetting your gloves?'

'Thank you. Good afternoon.'

He rode to the Blue Gate and two miles down the frozen road outside it, then turned back, chilled to the bone and not appreciably wiser. On the way back he turned into St. John's Place and dismounted on the wide, flat steps of the cathedral's north porch. The sun was setting. Approaching darkness had emptied the Place of townsfolk, leaving it bare and cheerless; even the beggars had gone. The wind, still blowing, tugged at his coat; with dusk it seemed to be getting bolder, more tempestuous, as if preparing to make a night of it. On the edges of the Place the city seemed to

crouch like something alive behind the uneven roof-lines, the few lighted windows and the chimney smoke.

He had hoped, not in so many words, that the sight of the cathedral might evoke in him something of the mood which had gone into its building, which its soaring architecture did, for many, still symbolise. He had turned aside hoping to find something not related to ordinary living, as holiness, say, is not related to ordinary living. He had even thought of going inside, less in search of God than as one submitting himself, open-eyed, to possible infection. Now he knew he could not go in. Standing there, bridle over arm, under a grey sky, winter pressing down and a bad night coming on, he found it irrationally annoying to think that this spired and carven and magnificent entity which was the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine and so much more besides did not feel the cold, did not fear the darkness, would be here when he was gone. In a world where Brian felt himself lost and helpless it was at home ; handsome and perdurable it mocked him with a worldliness, a self-assurance he could only envy. In its own way it had arrived at that compromise with life which is the one alternative to extinction. Toward some rapprochement with an unfriendly universe all life must strive, by whatever means, and that a cathedral should most perfectly achieve this and thus symbolise not a way of life but its goal – this was, Brian saw, exquisitely just. Of all things it must be the most in accord with the world as God had created it ; it was, in sober fact, God's advocate, year in and year out singing his praises, arguing with stubborn minds that showed signs of doubting this was the best of all possible worlds, Jehovah the best of all possible

gods ; bribing this one with a share in paradise and cowing another with hell's flames – striving always, in a word, to keep open revolt from breaking out. Brian saw no reason for being offended ; it made no secret of its business, conducted it legitimately with an admirable efficiency and a respectable amount of success. But he saw clearly that it could offer him nothing he could use, and he regretted it sincerely if not very deeply.

He raised his eyes past the carven doors, past the rows of soot-streaked saints and kings, past the rose window to the jutting gargoyles and spires and darkening sky. Toward this handsome and contented worldliness he himself might be striving with some incidental discomfort, and some day, no doubt, it would be his, just as some day – he hoped – he would look like Louis of Basil ; but for the present he was still young, racked with growing pains maybe but still young. And he was not satisfied with the world as he found it and saw no reason why he should be. ‘I miss in you,’ he thought, ‘what I miss in the Cardinal. Revolt. Neither of you tried very hard. You will probably tell me that I am a sinner and there was a Sunday morning I might have agreed with you but now I know better. I know now that there is no sin but being untrue to myself.’

He blinked and lowered his eyes. The dusk had thickened ; the windows on the edge of the Place seemed brighter and farther away ; the wind was certainly colder. He was tired and lonely but when he rode across the Place he was sitting a little straighter in his saddle.

He missed Eleanor most at night, eating supper alone.

CHAPTER XX

BUT the days were long without her too and he carried with him everywhere the little ache which was her absence and his need of her. He tried hard to be – as he put it – sensible when he realised that he was thinking of her more than he had ever thought of anyone except himself. His own company – which he valued highly – he avoided ; or rather he wanted Eleanor's more ; and it annoyed him that he should want it so intemperately as to affect seriously his sleep, his appetite and the quality of his temper. He felt it most keenly as a reflection on his self-control and he decided that it must stop. Those were his words. ' This must stop,' he said firmly, and then demanded of the Basil I architecture which lined Bent Lane between the Royal Square and the Praen house, with patient reasonableness : ' Is this the way for a man of my experience to be acting ? One would think, good Lord, that I had never slept alone before.' Which was rhetoric appropriate enough to the setting (debased neo-classical) and quite irrelevant to the point at issue. His trouble was not unsatisfied lechery and he knew it, and he ceased to pretend that it was after a revelatory half-hour with one of Lady Praen's nieces.

Her name was Celia ; she was young enough, dark, and this holy night inside a gown which clung to her plumpness like her skin. The gown, crossing his line of vision as he greeted Lady Praen, drew him first ; Anne followed his glance and told him he could take her home. ' What would I do without

you, Brian? You are the only man here who could escort a gown like that and not be talked about. She would wear it. But her visit has not been much of a success, poor dear. This is her last fling before she settles down to having some babies and so far not a man has dared to make love to her. Yes, you fit in very nicely.'

'And Eleanor?' he inquired with as virtuously shocked an expression as he could muster.

'Oh, Eleanor has met her.'

'Well?'

'My dear Brian, it is only strange women we object to your going with, strange to us. Then our imaginations get in their deadly work. Besides, you have met her too.'

'I?'

'The night of the Cardinal's dinner, in this very room. But she was fully clothed then and you had Eleanor. You two!' Anne gazed at him in despair.

'Brian dear, when I see you two together I want to cry and I feel a hundred years old.' She looked across the room and then at him again, searching his eyes. 'She loves you, Brian.'

'Well,' says Brian gruffly, 'I love her.'

'I know. Only - well, it seems to me that a man does not realise, cannot realise, how deep it goes. Why, if you should do anything to her it would kill her, Brian. When she is here I hear nothing but Brian, Brian, all day long. It is like a song.' She smiled at him. 'What an old woman I am! Where is Celia?'

'Over there.'

'You would know.'

They overtook the undulating hips and Brian discovered that their owner had a dimple in the right cheek and that she could talk so expressively

with her eyes, her hands and her shoulders that one was seldom aware of what she was saying but as seldom ignorant of what, in essence, she meant. She proved to be, for a woman married two and a half years to a King's Magistrate (Vare), sufficiently stimulating company. But she was not Eleanor and in the coach the fact that she was not Eleanor became her sole distinction. On Brian this acted with disproportionate effect ; his passion – for all he could do – lacked fire and their preliminary coarsenesses, wit. Thus Celia admitted after practically no urging that she had other dimples and he could manage nothing better than : ‘ I can see your husband sitting up when he cannot sleep and counting them. They are a decided improvement on sheep.’ And when he was kissing her for the second time he recalled what Eleanor had said about the girl in the green dress and withdrew his own hands and lips. His thought was : ‘ After all, I hardly know the woman. Inside she may be heaven knows what, actually.’ The aphrodisiacal gown lost most of its effectiveness because he knew Eleanor would never have had the bad taste to wear it. He suspected (after the second kiss) a cavity among Celia's teeth, possibly two, and an impregnable mediocrity throughout the rest of her. Briefly, the handicaps were such that anything resembling an elegant seduction was impossible ; and in a very short time Celia's hands had ceased to flutter defensively and there were eleven inches of green upholstery and several miles of throbbing silence between them. Their parting in the courtyard of her father-in-law's house was pungent. ‘ Thank you,’ she says, ‘ for a very pleasant evening. I shall never forget it.’ He assured her that she was much too kind. ‘ If you ever come to Vare,’ says she, ‘ be sure to visit us. My husband will be delighted to

meet you.' 'The pleasure will be all mine,' he murmured. 'And bring Lady Malvern with you.' 'Oh, I am not married.' 'Oh, I thought you were, I really did. Good night.' 'Good night.'

Then he was face to face with himself again, a single figure (as it seemed to him) in the quiet bowl of the world, listening to the rising drone of his own thoughts. He knew he was sick of his own company, sick as hell, and all his misery merged into a dumb longing, an aching need to see Eleanor, to touch her and hear her voice again.

So the watch, coming up from the cobbled bareness of Elder Place, found him standing on the narrow pavement opposite Eleanor's house. The lantern in the officer's hand lifted and the faces of the two men glowed against the darkness, eyeing each other; the eagle on Brian's chest likewise caught the light and the lantern, after a moment, swung down. Shadowy now, his mouth and eyes indistinct, the officer said: 'Sir, it is my duty to learn your business here at this hour.'

Brian wished he would go away. His square bulk blotted out Eleanor's white, lamplit door and he did not belong in the mirage of snowy midnights and foggy dawns which still clung to Brian's eyes. He answered: 'I am wishing my lady pleasant dreams.'

The officer glanced across the street. 'Amory, Lucé, Loveland,' he says, as if reading the shields on the doorposts.

'I serve Lucé,' says Brian.

'I remember her husband's funeral. Good night, sir.'

'Good night.'

He left, carrying his handful of light to the Square, where his light and then his footsteps died. Brian

leaned back into his shelter, an angle of rough stone where two houses met unevenly. In the cellar of one somebody was chopping wood ; in the other, an upper room, a baby cried. Otherwise the Sabbath night was very still. The air was frosty with a misted moon riding above the gables and snow – by the taste of the air – long overdue. A stiff, sluggish wind pushed against the trees in a near-by courtyard and made them creak ; somewhere a cock, startled into a defiance of chanticlerian common sense, crowed hoarsely, sleepily.

He remembered the way she laughed when something had pleased her and how delicious her drawl could be ; the deep wisdom that was hers, her unmarred joy in living, the clean, breath-taking perfection of her body, the very silks and furs she swathed it in. He remembered that when he came very close to her his head filled with the perfume that rose from her hair, her lips, her bosom. It was as if he had broken into a scented cloud that hung about her as clouds are said to have hung about the ancient goddesses. He was not sure whether they had used the clouds to ride on or in place of clothes ; the engravings which remained in his memory favoured the clothes theory though the evidence was scanty enough. Eleanor might know. Though Eleanor had once told him : ‘ Never mind my clothes,’ when he had admired a new dress. He had said : ‘ My dear, black becomes you so I advise you to choose a hopeless invalid for your next husband.’ And she had told him not to mind her clothes, so, a little surprised, he had explained : ‘ Long ago I read about the stupid hero who never noticed what the heroine was wearing, to her great annoyance. I was merely trying to be clever for I know nothing about women’s clothes, and as a matter of fact the

less you have on the better I——’ But Eleanor had interrupted him by thrusting her wrap into his hands – they had been going somewhere ; he had forgotten where – and exclaiming : ‘ But you missed the point entirely, Brian ! ’ He had put the cloak around her and said : ‘ Which is ? ’ And Eleanor had answered : ‘ Which is that a hero never does notice.’ He had eyed her glumly. ‘ It is rather funny,’ he had conceded. As they went down the stairs he added : ‘ But it has been observed before that the essence of heroism is a spectacular and fortunate stupidity. Do you like your men dumb ? ’ Eleanor had replied : ‘ I like you,’ but he forgot to answer her in the pleasure of watching her descend the stairs. That was the time he had first noticed how sheer her stockings were ; the silk was so fine that the delicate veins on her instep were discernible. And in her walk there had been no evidence that her slippers touched the rugs and even the stairs she negotiated – one hand lifting her embroidered skirt front – in a manner that suggested winged heels.

Now she was sleeping as he remembered she slept, no doubt, head bent, dark hair spreading, one arm thrust out over the edge of the bed ; lovely, helpless, not at all aware that he was so near. He would have given a year of his life to enter that door and go up the cream-and-mahogany stairs to her room ; and kiss her lips once and leave. No more than that. He was conscious of a new humility and a greater tenderness in his thoughts of her ; not for the world, had he been privileged to enter her room, would he have lain himself down beside her. Not to-night. Her body’s loveliness he knew and gloried in but he was learning how beautiful she was inside too, back of the level eyes and

under the white skin of her breast, and before that inner loveliness he abased himself in the same moment that he felt a song rushing to his lips. He wanted to sing, she was so damned fine through and through.

‘And she loves me,’ he thought, his heart lifting, ‘why, she thinks the world of me. And I love her. Of course I have always loved her, but this is different.’

He needed her. It was the simple truth that he could not live without her. She was his share of the world’s truth and beauty ; to her he must always return for rest and refreshment and courage to keep on. Without her what was there left to live for ? For all the years of his living what had he to show but this : that he loved Eleanor, that he was man enough to give her nearly the love that was her due. . . .

Could he but go to her once more and once more put her wrap around her and watch her come down the stairs — they would enter his coach and ride away. Where ? Somewhere far away, where they could be alone. Pelona, Pelona in the spring. . . . If he could but approach her and kneel beside her and put his head on her breast — Her hand would be like the hand of God on his brow. He could sleep.

*O Western Wind, when wilt thou blow,
That the Small Rain down can rain,
Christ, that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again !*

Her bedroom window was a square of black glass that reflected murkily a patch of cloud and sky ; below the lantern creaked on its hook. Winter’s

iron cold lay on the city, not windy, not sharp, but a heavy, sluggish cold one moved through with an effort, that was like a polar wind frozen into immobility. Cold and darkness ; and no sound ; in the whole infinitude of the frozen night nothing made a sound, no living thing stirred.

CHAPTER XXI

THE song remained, plaintive-sounding music for the measures his thoughts trod, like figures on a screen. A long-legged Elizabethan in an alleyway at night in the dead of winter, shaping four lines of verse against his great unhappiness and the coming of the larger darkness which would shroud him for ever, but never the song he had made—— Had spring ever come for him? Brian wondered. And then he thought of spring in Pelona, and Eleanor in a light-coloured gown moving across level grass, Four Courts' towers back of her and Pelona's sun shining down on her hair. Spring never came to town. . . .

The door opened and Francis strode in. He saw Brian dozing before the fireplace, legs outstretched toward it and head sunk in an attitude of complete exhaustion. Blugete limped out of the kitchen; Francis ordered hot coffee and approached the fire, spurs jingling. He sat down across the table from Brian, took off his gloves but not his hat, and said: 'Hello.'

Brian raised a heavy head. 'Oh, you? Hello.' Francis was dressed in a uniform which was the duplicate of Brian's even to the eagle on his chest. His bony face seemed thinner and hollower than ever though this may have been an effect of the firelight, which was all the light there was in the room. His eyes looked tired. 'When did you get back?'

'This afternoon.'

‘I saw Louis at about four and he——’

‘I have not been to the house yet,’ Francis explained. He bent toward the fire, warming his hands. Blugete came with the coffee. Francis poured cream, measured his usual five spoons of sugar and stirred, clinking the spoon against the cup. Brian told the host to refill his cup also and then rested an elbow on the table. ‘Where have you been until now?’

‘In bed.’

‘Excuse me. I should have guessed it.’

There was silence for a while; both men found the coffee good. Francis glanced at Brian. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I was thinking.’

Francis grunted. In some obscure corner of the room a man was snoring comfortably. A coal snapped to the dusty tiles near Brian’s crossed boots and cooled there. ‘Have you seen Beverly or Eric since you returned?’

‘I have seen none of my friends since I returned.’

‘Friends?’ Brian drank from his cup. ‘Hah!’

Under his moustache Francis’s lips twisted.

‘Except, of course, the one I slept with.’

‘What in God’s name made you leave her on a night like this?’

‘Your trouble.’

‘Mine?’

‘Yes. I was thinking, I also. Flat on my back, in the dark, I thought.’ Francis shuddered delicately and lifted his cup.

‘You thinking? The picture, for some reason, appeals to me. I do not doubt your word, observe. But you should have remembered what Louis used to tell us when we were boys and could not sleep.’

‘I have forgotten.’

‘Thinking in bed is bad; go to sleep.’

‘ Even if Louis had been there I do not think I would have slept.’

‘ So you came here. Well, let us think together. Blugete ! Some more coffee.’

‘ And some of those little cakes,’ says Francis, when the host came. ‘ I am hungry.’

Blugete was very sorry but there was only the day-old pastry – had the gentlemen forgotten it was Sunday ? – and the baker would not be around for another hour at least.

‘ Then bring what you have,’ Francis ordered, ‘ if necessary I can dip them into my coffee.’

‘ The word,’ says Brian, ‘ is dunk and the manœuvre is permissible after midnight even on Sunday, even though ladies may be present.’

Francis told him he was very funny. Their coffee came, strong and hot ; the cakes proved to be soft enough though worn and chipped as to icing. ‘ Pass the sugar if there is any left,’ says Brian. ‘ So you were thinking ?’

‘ Yes.’

‘ May I be damned !’

Wearily : ‘ Oh, go to hell.’

That year the one retort to almost anything concerned female anatomy. Brian made it automatically and sank his teeth in the bottom half of a raisin bun.

‘ What were you thinking about ?’

‘ Myself.’

‘ Of course. And what have you decided ?’

‘ That I am right and the world is wrong.’

‘ Oh ! It is not a very original conclusion.’

‘ But a satisfying one.’

‘ Does it satisfy you ?’

Francis eyed him for a moment. ‘ It must ; from now on it must. It is something I know, you understand ?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I shall not try to explain it to you.’

Brian washed down a mouthful of cake. ‘Though I do believe the idea has been phrased in slightly different words. Something about clinging to faith in one’s self——’

Francis said brusquely : ‘My own definition will do for me.’

Brian shrugged. Then : ‘You still eat the top of your cake first, I notice.’

Francis gazed at his fist. ‘Do I?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘Nothing. Some people do and some do not. I noticed it as far back as the picnics we used to have in Pelona. Elizabeth eats the bottom of hers first; I do too. So does Eleanor. Louis does not eat the bottom at all. Once I saw him slice a cake in two and butter the bottom of the upper half. It still seems to me about as regal a gesture as a man can make.’

Francis asked casually : ‘How is Eleanor?’

Brian felt the skin on the back of his neck twitch.

‘Eleanor is very well, thank you.’

‘I am glad to hear it.’

‘I shall tell her so to-morrow.’

‘Do.’

Silence.

‘I once thought of marrying her.’

‘So Elizabeth told me.’

‘I really think I was in love with her.’

‘I can hardly contradict you. What time do you suppose it is?’

‘Nearly four, I should think. Blugete, what time is it?’

‘Four o’clock, sir.’

‘Yes, I think I was in love with her. And I think she liked me. But you had to come along, you beautiful bastard, and now——’ Francis spread his hands, smiling very slightly.

The clock in the kitchen chimed twice. Francis said: ‘What time did he say it was?’

‘Four o’clock.’

‘There must be something the matter with that clock.’

‘I would not be at all surprised.’

Francis looked at the fire. ‘So that was one thing I could, if I wished, think about. But there were others. You remember the night you had her down at Ruby’s?’

‘Umm.’ Brian had closed his eyes.

‘Louis held a meeting that night.’

‘I heard something about it.’

‘Within three months, in the spring, he will be king. What do you think of that?’

‘I think he is wise to wait for dependable weather. He has to go to the cathedral bareheaded, you know, and at his age—— But there is an idea for you,’ says Brian, opening his eyes, glancing at Francis’s set, firelit face and then closing them again, ‘you should hold out for an earlier date, pray for rain and pneumonia——’

‘That is my father – also – you are talking about.’

‘Yes, I know. On second thought I withdraw the suggestion. You will be God’s anointed long enough after Louis is gone. The difference will be slight but appreciable.’

‘It will make a difference to you and some others.’

‘Not really?’

‘How would you like to be made commander of the Northmen’s Pass garrison?’

‘I would have to consult with my wife.’

‘Eh?’

‘The remuneration is inconsiderable of course, but the position honourable and the chances for advancement good. All this would have to be explained to her in the event, my dear brother, that I did not meanwhile wring your neck very thoroughly.’

Francis grinned. ‘You will have all your friends with you. You could even take that bookseller and his press along and continue to print your rag.’

Brian snored.

‘God-damned scribblers.’

Brian made a noise with his mouth. ‘That,’ says he, ‘for you. To-morrow I shall put it into writing and next week into *The Triumverate*. It is something to know how to scribble.’

‘Flute player.’

‘It is a flageolet.’

Francis emptied the sugar bowl into his cup. ‘Scribble and blow – I can wait.’

‘Patience has been numbered among the virtues.’

‘In three months Louis; and after Louis, me. Yes, I can wait.’

Brian looked up. Francis was staring into the fire, still smiling a little, his hat pushed down over his eyes. Brian eyed his large nose with profound distaste. ‘The more I learn about you,’ he says, ‘the more I realise that I shall never really like you.’

Francis turned his head slowly. His dark face was expressionless. He says carefully: ‘I have never seen the necessity for that.’

Brian sighed. ‘No, I suppose you would not. Even when we were boys in Pelona you were an unlovable brat. Why? What makes you such a confounded nuisance?’

‘I can go alone.’

‘Hell, you have to.’

‘I hardly think it matters.’

‘That is for you to decide, of course. I merely wonder, now and then, if you never hate yourself. That would make it nearly unanimous.’

Francis’s mouth twisted, almost as if he were in pain. His eyes smouldered. ‘You can talk, all of you can talk. But what do you know of me, what does anyone know? And what does it matter? God damn me, why should it matter that no one knows the real me, inside, here?’ He tapped his chest and then let his hand lie there, outspread near his eagle. ‘I tell you I am fine inside, tender as a girl and ready to die for a friend. And I have no friend. Yah!’ he snarled.

Brian stared. ‘God bless us!’

‘I can go alone. By God, I will go alone and from now on I’ll stamp down the man that gets in my way.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes. And you in particular had better stay out of my way. Understand?’

‘No.’

‘You had a good life in Pelona, didn’t you? You had things your own way. The two of you were always against me. You took this and you took that. Now you come here and take my woman and——’

‘Eleanor was never yours.’

‘I know what I know, twice over.’

‘Shut your mouth before I shut it for you.’

‘Because you are bigger? Well, listen to me, you. You may be as big as a house but by Christ there is one thing you will never get. You hear me? There is one thing no bastard, not even my father’s bastard, is going to take away from me.’

Brian said, thickly : ' What did you call me just now ? '

' I called you a bastard. Do you want me to do it again ? '

' No. Once is enough.' Brian felt his stomach freeze. ' It is the truth, of course, and with the truth I cannot quarrel. But I do not like the way you of all people speak that truth ; which is,' says Brian, leaping up and dragging Francis out of his chair by the throat, ' one reason why there are so many saints and martyrs. O God damn your rotten soul——'

He discovered that his thumbs were aching from pressing into Francis's throat and that someone was tugging at his arms. A voice was saying : ' Let him go, sir ; he has fainted. Some cold wine, you.'

Another voice, Blugete's, said quaveringly : ' My mother always used to say a key down the back was the best.'

' That is for nosebleed, stupid. Move, move ! ' Then Robert took a bottle of wine and poured it into Francis.

Brian, almost as limp, quite as white, eyed his brother across the table. There were blue marks on Francis's throat and his uniform was stained with wine. He sat with eyes closed, narrow shoulders bowed, breathing painfully. Brian leaned an elbow on the table and pushed a hand through his hair. He was sick inside and his chest ached with grief. ' Why are you what you are ? I could like you - I think I would like to have a brother. But you - I thrashed you from one end of Pelona to the other and now the farce still goes on. Lord, must I kill you to end it ? '

Francis made throaty, derisive noises. Brian wiped his eyes. ' Friends ? God in heaven——'

Francis did not open his eyes. He mumbled : ' They – they talked of you at that meeting and – and that is why – that is why——' He sighed gently. ' Bastard.'

Brian frowned, puzzled, and then the thought came that took his breath away. He looked helplessly at Francis, at Robert, at the dull, firelit walls which did not seem a part of any sane world just now. ' So that is why—— And yet as God lives I never thought of it until now. I swear I did not ! And I do not want to think of it,' he cried, ' I do not want it, I say.'

Francis cackled.

Brian prayed, head in arms : ' God, I have never sincerely gone through the chantings and the acrobatics which your priests say is your particular delight and so I cannot, as a man of honour, ask your help now. Yet I wish I could feel close to you for I do not want this thing, I do not even want to think of this thing. O God, do not let it poison my living,' he groaned.

Robert asked : ' Does it hurt ? '

Brian lifted his head. Francis was gone. He looked around, found himself again. Robert was bending over him. ' What are you doing here, Robert ? '

' I came in for a glass of wine and fell asleep yonder. Does your finger hurt ? '

' My finger ? ' Brian raised his left hand. ' Why, yes. I – I believe it is broken.'

' He broke it while you had him by the throat. Hold out your hand, sir.'

" Will it—— Ouch ! Oh, hell's fire ! '

Robert bound it – it was the little finger of the left hand – and made a sling from two kerchiefs. Brian gazed at his crippled hand sadly. ' No more music for a while, Robert. But we must be going.'

He rose. His face was wet with perspiration. ' Lord, how weak I am. You had better come with me.'

' Yes, sir.'

' And you will quarter at my house for a few days. Remind me to-morrow to send for your outfit.'

Then Brian dropped a coin on the table, large enough to pay for Francis's coffee also, and they went out. The crisp air was very sweet ; the night was still dark, the vacant streets, the city, still profoundly quiet. But his song had faded from his brain.

CHAPTER XXII

THE affair made no noise in the city. Brian stayed indoors all day while Francis – presumably – wore his linen higher and said nothing. The doctor told Brian his hand would be as good as ever in three weeks ; by sunset Brian had got used to the dull pain of it and also reached a sort of understanding with himself. This was imperative.

‘Let me be honest,’ he reflected. He was sitting back of the piano, near the tall window where Eleanor had once found him. This time again it was twilight outside and there were no lamps in the room. He had been trying to read Montaigne.

So he reflected, nursing his hand. ‘I would not refuse the crown if it was offered to me. A king has no more disagreeable time than most of us and I think I could manage the business handily. But that is not the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is this : on the day I begin to desire and to scheme for it, on that day will I become wholly wretched and my living poisoned.’ He considered this. ‘Really,’ he decided, ‘it is shocking to realise how little I have to say about the me that is finally, and for good and all, me. For I am not at all sure that I will not sink to the level of that divinely-appointed Francis. And that would be dreadful.’

He smiled on one side of his face. ‘I begin to agree with those theologians who maintain that God had not quite finished man when – to His surprise and annoyance – the creature came alive

in His hands and wriggled away, incomplete, unadmirable, predestined to misery and hell. It is as good an explanation as many.'

His favourite gesture was a shrug; and so he shrugged and dismissed the matter because any more thought was futile and any more emotion undignified. What Francis might do would remain unimportant while Louis was alive; this much Brian could depend on. The rest was to-morrow's business and would be met when to-morrow came. For the present, to-night, he was going to West Lane to tell Eleanor that she must marry him. And when she had said yes he would tell her that they must leave for Pelona within the week.

Crossing the Royal Square he entered West Lane and stopped before Eleanor's door. After a while it opened. And in the light of the candle which Eleanor's cook had set on a table in the echoing, chilly hall, with his arms making enormous gestures against the cream-and-mahogany stairs, Brian had a long glass of brandy and then another one not so long. Then he went out, headed for Louis of Basil's house on Vintners Lane.

It may have been the brandy which made the night seem warmer and Roland on his pillar seem to move; re-crossing the Square Brian paused to make sure. His breath made recurring plumes in the air. And Roland, upright in his stirrups, sword a thin, heaven-challenging line, head turned to glance back at a phantom army, Roland was solid enough. Yet he moved, without effort, as a ghost moves; or it was the brandy or the sick fear in Brian's heart or the cloud, ragged with the wind's hectoring, behind him. And now it occurred to Brian, while ever so impersonally he felt his quivering body gather itself into compactness again, that

the pillar was very frail. If someone should place two hands against it and push. . . . He kept on across the Square until he came to the bare, paved space from which the pillar rose. The base of it was enormously broad and solid, quite immovable, Brian decided. On one of its surfaces were the words **ROLAND THE CONQUEROR** in thick, raised letters. Brian looked up. From this angle Roland was rather more impressive than before ; higher, clear of ordinary men with feet to the ground, a partner of the skies and winds. Brian sighed and went on to the house of Basil, and Louis's library with its three very broad windows.

CHAPTER XXIII

AND while Louis talked of this and that, in a grieving monotone of the many things which were annoying Louis, Brian sprawled in a large chair and eyed the one object of which Louis's library windows gave an unsurpassed view. From where Brian sat, Roland, soaring above the house-tops, solid black against a mottled sky, appeared to be in advance of an army, at the moment delayed among the fruit stands of the King's Road but an army which would, in a few minutes, pour out of it and – while Louis grew more and more annoyed – march across the Square and into the palace gardens.

Then Louis stopped talking and he drummed finger-tips on hundred-year-old wood while he eyed Brian without approval. On the table between them stood silver candlesticks holding very thick candles, a wine bottle on a silver tray and two glasses. Brian stretched out an arm and filled his glass. 'Of course,' says he, 'you are perfectly right from your point of view. Still——' says Brian, and conveyed the glass in a long arc from the table to his chin. Louis grunted but Brian drank with pleasure, having answered whatever Louis had been saying as adequately as it deserved. He added, conversationally: 'You know, I think I could do Peter an extraordinary service by hiring someone to pull down that statue. It is an idea I got from a book.'

Louis said: 'Twenty years ago the idea might have been considerable; to-day it is not so good.'

Besides, the statue is one of the best works of its kind, as you would know if you knew anything about art.'

'I consider that——'

'Why should we quarrel? There is a time for nudes and a time for memorial statues.'

'There is. In fact I have achieved something of reputation as a critic by denying before a whole White Star full of simple-minded art lovers that a portrait of a woman without any clothes on is the highest form of art, to be surpassed only by a portrait of two women without any clothes on. So I cannot let your insinuation pass——'

'If you please, we will go into the subject more fully some other time. At present—since you evidently did not hear a word I said before—I would like to know just what relevance there is between the bandage on your left hand and the marks on Francis's throat.'

'I rather expected him to tell you.'

'Let me hear what you have to say.'

'There is not much. I came very near choking him dead last night. In the White Star.'

'Who else was there?'

'My orderly.'

'No one else?'

'The host.'

'Was it over the black-haired woman?'

'Eleanor's name was mentioned. However we managed a show of politeness until something else came up. Among other things—most of which I already knew—I learned that you all had decided, in solemn conclave met, that even though I was your bastard I could, if worst came to worst, be called a Basil. Have I thanked you?'

'Do you find it so amusing?'

‘Amusing? Good God, yes. I laugh every time I think of it.’ Brian sagged in his chair. ‘Louis, there are times when I find it hard to admire you.’

‘It is in very bad taste to say so. Still, I will not insist on admiration.’

‘Mind, it is not prejudice. I make no mention of my mother.’

Louis’s eyebrows rose. ‘Why should you?’

‘I would not, at all, but – and this reminds me that I came here once before to see you about it – I inherited a conscience from her.’

‘A conscience?’

‘Yes.’

‘From your mother?’

‘From her or from you.’

Louis eliminated himself with a wave of the hand. ‘Go on.’

‘A conscience, you understand, that puts a bad taste in your mouth after you have slept with your mistress and also makes it hard to admire your own father – you do not pick such a conscience out of the thin air.’

‘I suppose not. Though I really know very little about it. Charles – the Cardinal – might be able to help you.’

‘I shall be sure to ask him the next time we meet. Will you pass the bottle? Thank you.’

When Brian lowered his glass he was not smiling. ‘I have never missed my mother, Louis. How could I? I cherish a memory of white arms and a fragrance and a kind voice heard in half sleep – that is all I have of her and more I have never desired. On the whole I think I have been lucky. I must be for ever thankful that you knew when to tell me we were quits and shake my hand and let me go; and because I have never known my mother there is a

whole ocean of bad poetry I am not called upon to admire publicly. Yes, I have been lucky ; yet now and then – when my conscience twinges, say – I wonder about this woman who bore me, whose blood and bone I am.’

‘Your mother,’ says Louis, ‘was one of the loveliest women I have ever seen.’

Brian gestured. ‘I could, sir, depend on you to make sure of that.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I was thinking more of the inside of her head. Did she, I wonder, ever accuse you of having ruined her life?’

Louis smiled ever so slightly and bent his beautiful old head so that his beard, combed perfectly, discreetly perfumed, spread fan-wise on his linen. ‘She was also the wisest woman I have ever known. For two years,’ he said slowly, ‘I was your mother’s lover but – and this distinction is important, it was the essence of her character and of her life – she was always her own mistress. Of her love she gave all I desired but she resisted deliberately, with a persistence I have never met with in anyone else, all attempted invasions of her inner privacy. I take it you know what I mean. We distinguish those we love by denying that reticence is compatible with love ; we chant of true lovers who must become one and try to ransack a soul as we do a corsage. Your mother – rightly, I think now – called this outrageous indecency and when your appearance became inevitable she was furious, not because I had burdened her with a child but because it was like a last, desperate effort to put my mark on her. I had no such idea, of course, but if I had——’

‘I was never your son, Louis.’

‘No. She remained her own to the last. You are all hers.’

‘And Elizabeth is yours and Francis is the true bastard.’

There was quiet in the room for a while.

‘Do you find that amusing, Louis?’

‘Pass the bottle.’

Brian passed the bottle and then there was quiet in the room for another while.

‘Are you,’ Louis asked, ‘are you starting for the south to-morrow?’

‘Yes. I wish you had told Eleanor to wait along the road somewhere. There is a splendid inn at Wallace.’

‘The Trader’s House. I remember I ate the best country sausage I ever had in my life there.’

‘You remember the pictures?’

‘And the horse’s head on all the silver and crockery?’

‘Ah! Eleanor would not have minded waiting there.’

‘It is better to keep her twenty-four hours ahead of you; you will keep moving. Toward Pelona. I envy you.’

‘I went over there to-night, you know, to tell her we were leaving. And I found you had been there ahead of me. But it was your idea in the first place.’

‘Was it?’

‘You remember the ball in the palace New Year’s Eve?’

‘It does not matter. Stay there until I send for you.’

‘I will probably come back a married man.’

Louis smiled. ‘We shall try to make your return an event.’

Brian glanced up. 'Oh, yes, I forgot that.' He moved his legs and found an easier position in his chair. 'I suppose it is too late to tear down that statue. But I wonder what would happen if someone were to send Peter a history of the Roman Empire. Or almost any history. Surely he would notice that the number of pages filled with the exploits of kings is equalled only by the number of pages filled with the exploits of prime ministers. Really, the idea is not at all bad. I shall see Daniel tomorrow.'

Louis grunted. 'Peter,' he says, 'has not read a book of any sort for ten years.'

'Bah!'

'Why should he read? He has all he needs of knowledge and he is perfectly at home in his world. Why should he read books?' Louis's eyes glinted maliciously.

Brian stirred. 'You are going to tell me again that literature is the refuge of weaklings, of the defrauded, the unsuccessful, the cowardly; that, in fine, they usually spend the evening at home with a good book because they have nowhere else to go. To a great, to a dishearteningly great extent this is true, so true that I wonder if the writers of books do not often feel like panders or clowns. But I tell you now as I have told you before that great literature is not the work of such people. A great book remains a great man, whatever the use it is put to. You think because——'

'Stop waving your arms.'

'—senile old men and sentimental spinsters and young people with more imagination than courage and a whole college of "gentle essayists" have besmirched literature with their dribblings and affectations that——'

‘I will not argue with you. You are worse than Daniel. Ring for another bottle.’

‘I am right and you know it. Otherwise what are all these doing here?’ He waved a hand at the rows of books against the walls, their leather backs and gilt lettering gleaming warmly in the firelight.

‘Ring.’

When Garth had come back and refilled their glasses he spoke to Louis. Elizabeth had returned and wished to see Brian before he left. Brian nodded; as the door closed he glanced at Louis. ‘Who is entertaining to-night?’

‘Several people, I imagine. Why?’

‘I was wondering where Elizabeth had been.’

‘I believe,’ says Louis, lifting his glass, ‘that she has been to the palace. In fact I am sure of it.’

‘Oh! Is – is young Roland sick again?’

‘No. He is much improved. No, Elizabeth did not go to see him. She went to see Peter.’

Brian’s hand jerked beyond any power of his to control. ‘Peter?’

‘Yes.’ Louis’s eyes burned into his. ‘Does it surprise you?’

To set the glass down was an absolute, physical necessity. He managed: ‘Should it? I mean should it surprise me?’

Louis drained his glass and wiped his beard with the back of his hand. ‘I will tell you a little secret. Yesterday, after we had finished with some business, Peter took me aside and formally requested Elizabeth’s hand in marriage.’

Brian gawked at the other man with a horrified realisation that his own brain had stopped functioning. The little inner voice was gone. Louis, however, was more robust. ‘Peter assured me,’ he went on, ‘with some embarrassment but quite

evident sincerity that he loved my daughter and that she loved him. Only my consent was needed for an open declaration of their betrothal. He added that she did not know I was being asked ; it was a surprise he was preparing for her. I told him her surprise would probably be great. He thought so too. We talked it over and agreed finally that the naming of the happy day should be left to Elizabeth.'

'May I be damned !'

'Why should you be ?'

'Imagine him asking you that.'

'I consider it the most natural thing in the world. After all, I am her father.'

'Does Elizabeth know ?'

'I told her this afternoon.'

'What did she say ?'

'What was there for her to say ? She loves him.'

'Yes, I know. I stumbled over them one afternoon down on Mellick's farm, you see. Well, what are you going to do ?'

'I ? Nothing. Certainly I am not going to forbid her to marry the man she loves.'

'You mean it will not change your plans ?'

'No.'

'But what will become of Elizabeth ?'

'She will naturally go with Peter - if he still wants her.'

Brian swore.

'Why do you swear ? Your vocabulary is not so limited.'

'Hell's bells is not a swear word.'

Louis sighed. 'Some day we will go to Pelona and spend seven weeks settling these questions once and for all. To-night I am not in the mood.'

After a while Brian spoke : 'Is it worth what it will cost, Louis ?'

‘Yes.’

‘Nonsense. Look at it sensibly. Let Elizabeth marry Peter, let——’

‘Hush! Fill my glass, Brian.’

‘The bottle is empty.’

‘For heaven’s sake. Where did it all go?’

‘We must have drunk it.’

‘Ring for another.’

Brian rang for another.

Brian had slipped very low in his chair. He turned his head once to look at the windows; they had become dark mirrors, reflecting the firelight and candlelight and the two men sitting at the table, for outside the sky had closed, become one piece, solid and impenetrable. There was not a gleam, not a ray of light, and somewhere in the darkness which had fallen over the world, Roland was lost. Meanwhile, Louis was talking.

‘—through hell cheerily. For you live by common sense and see things sensibly, but there are times when it is best for a man studiously to ignore common sense and to keep a straight face before spectacles which are very funny indeed. Why,’ says Louis grimly, ‘do you think I am proud of Francis?’

Brian was too appalled to reply. Louis went on: ‘I recognise a good joke when I see it, whether it is Peter mumbling quite ordinary words or Elizabeth listening heartsick to those same words or Louis of Basil using the only life he has to make such jokes possible. And sometimes I laugh. Ha, ha. Like that.’

‘Till the tears roll down on your beard.’

‘And my sides ache. Yes. Then I become serious again. Francis may die a clown and Elizabeth pay in heavy sorrow for what happiness she gets and

Louis of Basil may feel deceit and dishonour foul ulcers within him – but the task he has set himself must be finished. My son, I do not see, as you do, a Peter who is rather admirable and a Francis who is not. I do not see on the one hand simply a young man with yellow hair and on the other a man with black. I see the strangers who have come into my father's house and abide there. They must go. I am a son of kings and proud.' Louis gestured. 'That I must explain such things to you !'

Brian said stubbornly : 'You need not. You conceive it as a point of honour with you, and honour I can understand without necessarily deploring your taste in it audibly.'

Louis threw out his hands. 'Honour !' says he. 'Well, call it whatever you wish but I still think it will not prove worth it. You have pointed your living toward that moment when Peter walks out of the palace but that will not be the end. Your life will not end at that climax, on a note of triumph, like a book ; you will have to keep on. Then, I think, you will learn whether it has been worth it.'

Louis said nothing for a minute or so. Then : 'My dear son, nothing in this world is worth what it costs so long as the end of man and all man does is death. We march to oblivion. My end is fixed past my changing but the road there has been left for me to choose. I have a life to live and I live it and no matter what I do the end of all is death. Not I nor all the high valorous deeds I have done nor the exceeding wickedness that has been mine, my dreams, my sufferings, my hopes and loves and prayers – nothing of all this will figure largely when They come to counting up the used suns. The end is the same and in the end it will not matter. But meanwhile – meanwhile the end is nowhere in

sight and it is highly important to me that I get what I want. I have been given only one life to live. Why should I do without when I can get what I want? Why reckon the cost? The end is the same and in the end it will not matter.'

Brian opened his eyes. He tried to lift his chin off his chest. He failed. 'Louis,' he says, 'I feel sure your philosophy is pernicious, false and probably blasphemous. I also am confident that it could be refuted item by item with any amount of evidence and precedent. But I am not the man to do it. I am going home; I have to get up early in the morning.'

Louis eyed him. 'Shall I call Garth? Or can you walk alone?'

'I am not drunk. I am perfectly sober. Good night.'

Louis watched him get out of his chair. Brian said good night several times and then rolled gracefully out of the room. Garth gave him his things and told him Elizabeth had tired of waiting and gone to bed. Brian was mildly thankful. Outside he found a world transformed; the snow was ankle deep and it was still falling.

CHAPTER XXIV

ROBERT shook him into wakefulness while it was still dark and then waited to see that he rose. Eyeing the night which yet filled the windows of his bedroom Brian recalled a pleasure little sung of: breakfast by candlelight, always tinged with strangeness and excitement, prelude to a great day since childhood. It made rising easier. Because Robert was watching him he crawled out from under the covers groaning like a dying man though a clear head attested the excellence of Louis's wine. A servant helped him dress for the winds of open country; heavy boots, two socks on each foot, breeches of the stoutest material the regulations permitted, two shirts. A hat, gloves lined with fur, a leather jacket also fur-lined, spurs and sword, would make him ready. He changed the outer bandage on his hand and went below.

Robert was bent over a table which a servant was setting for breakfast. There was a fire on the hearth and with his rear toward it Robert was studying a map, two candles for light and a cup of coffee for sustenance.

'Good morning, Robert.'

'Good morning, sir.'

'Have you had breakfast?'

'Only a cup of coffee to take the chill out of my stomach.'

The storm had passed; there had been a tremendous wind, Robert said, and it had swept some places bare to pile the snow waist deep in others.

Brian looked out of the window. The gateway of Duke Peter's house across the lane was impassable, the snow almost reaching, in a half-pyramid, the lantern in its arch. 'The wind is still blowing,' he said. Robert nodded. 'It will be a cruel ride and to-morrow no better.' What snow the wind could tear loose, Brian observed, writhed across the flagstones remarkably like pale smoke so that the edge of the windward drift appeared to be smouldering. 'I give us six days to reach warm weather.' Robert looked up. 'With luck,' he agreed, and went back to his map. Though it might be no more than the effect of this queer dawn-light, Brian reflected, for at the lower end of the lane a winter sun was rising and its grey light filled the street with the raw straight lines and shadows of an etching.

The servant brought in a coffee urn, still bubbling, and a note for Brian. He recognised Elizabeth's grey paper and large hand and opened the sheets flat while the servant filled his cup. It was quite a long letter and it began thus : 'I hope you are by now sober enough to read this.' One of Elizabeth's long, curving dashes followed. Brian poured more cream than usual, to cool his coffee for immediate drinking, vaulted the dash and went on. 'Louis says I may tell Peter whatever I wish, at any time. It seems needlessly cruel ; if he would forbid me to say a word I could tell Peter everything with a comforting sense of doing my wifely duty. But Louis is fair and leaves it for me to decide what my duty is. - I shall say nothing. To speak now, to precipitate Peter's and my banishments, to risk having him ask why I did not speak earlier - you see how it is. I am confident of his love but my absolute need of him makes me prudent. I will put it to no unreasonable strain. Let him believe I knew nothing. - He

is such a child. I could have slapped him when he told me what he had done. But he was so proud of himself – and what could I say? He spent the evening pestering me to set the date for our marriage. I enjoyed his pestering but I could not help asking him why he was so impatient, what he would have then that he does not have now. And he looked uncomfortable and murmured something about something else being honourable and best. I honestly believe he considers our behaviour a sin. In fact, I am sure of it for that is the reason he has never had a mistress. He told me at the very beginning of our affair that he would never have anything to do with a woman unless he really loved her and meant to marry her. Imagine! But I love the conscience-laden barbarian anyway; and he can hold his head a little higher because he will make an honest woman of me soon——’

Brian raised his head. ‘Yes, three eggs. Scrambled. Robert, how many do you want? We will not eat again until we reach the Crossroads.’

Robert said three would do, with plenty of bacon, and Brian began to read again. ‘I wanted to tell you last night – it is really only an hour ago and you are still down in the library guzzling with Louis and the snow is only beginning to fall – that Francis has sent two men south. Take it for what you think it is worth; Eleanor rides under Louis’s protection but you yourself must be very careful. I would have spoken to Louis about it but I have nothing to go on but something my maid overheard – I envy you. You are going to Pelona and I shall never see Pelona again. That does hurt; it hurts like the very devil, Brian. Peter gets only half a woman, for a part of me is buried irrecoverably in Pelona. Will there ever be twelve such years again, Brian, for anyone? – I

remember Louis came for me when summer's work was definitely over and the whole lovely country was aflame with fall. I saw them coming down the road ; they were white with its dust and I knew I would have a last hour to myself while Louis was swimming off his portion in the lake. When they turned off the road into the courtyard I was on the hill where the peach-trees are and after Louis had dismounted and I was sure it was he, I ran to the hanging rock, the slap of his gloves against his breeches in my ears. I pushed my legs over the edge and stared out across a very beautiful world. I suppose Pelona River is still a shining question mark on the face of the meadowlands and the North Road still looks like a not very clean white ribbon sewed to its edge and the haze still hangs above the forests on the lower slopes of the mountains – but that is all. The twelve years are finished. How hot and still those September afternoons could be ! I watched a bird that hovered lazily out in the middle of the great space above Pelona ; if you had been with me, we would have argued about him. I always held out for eagles, you may remember, while you, with a casual finality, without even getting off the flat of your back or turning your head, would shift the grass stem between your lips and assure me it was a chicken hawk. And you always added that it was the season for 'em, whatever that meant. I wonder if you ever realised how admirable you seemed to me ; I would have given an arm to be like you – I thought of you, as I watched the bird, and remembering what an influence you had over me I probably decided it was a chicken hawk. Though as I say, if you had been with me we would certainly have argued about it. But I was loyal to you, absent. Then I thought, not very happily, of to-morrow.

My time had come. You and Francis had gone ahead of me and there had been lonely days before I got used to being alone. Lord, how empty the fields and the hills and the lake were without you. They who in their summertimes had been princes and dragons, bandit kings and captains and every kind of hero and villain, had put away playing and gone out into a world where such things were properly looked upon as childish. Now the princess and the witch and the lost child, she also was being asked to grow up ; to put up her hair and to put down her skirts (and at any cost to keep them down), to remember her manners, to never look a strange man in the eye. Babby had me half sick with her talk but that night Louis spun tales from the other side of the candelabra and neatly gilded every stone in Illyria. So I did not look back when we started away in the morning ; and now I shall never go back. – Why, I always had it in my mind to go back sometime. When I am older, I promised myself, and have done my duty by my husband and society, and I realise how stupid I am to live in the dirty and noisy and bad-smelling place a city is – I will go back. I will not hope to become a girl again nor will I want to. It will be enough that the river and the road and the forest are still there, and the sun shines, and there is room to breathe. There the seasons march ; one grows old but the world does too, under one's eyes, companionably. And now I shall never go back. – My road leads west. After Louis has had his say Peter and I will go west. I shall leave everything behind ; it is bitter truth that Peter gets only half a woman for everything that has so far differentiated me from all other black-haired women I leave behind. Elizabeth of Basil will become that man Peter's wife and with our own hands we will

have to create, out of our love and quarrels and the days that are left to us, a world in which we can live and to which we can belong ; the House, if you wish, of Peter and Elizabeth. After the tearing loose and the journeying, when our tired bodies begin to feel well again and our brains clear, we shall have to strike root again, in the earth underfoot, to live at all. But just living will not be enough. It will not be enough that Peter and I get along like any other married pair, no better and no worse ; we are daring and paying for more than that. One way or another we must shape a life out of our two lives together ; there must be, at the end, something to show. Otherwise it would be infinitely wiser for Peter to go alone, or in company with almost any other woman of my general size and figure and age. For I know that love is not enough and there are things that matter more. Living does go on, even after such nights as never were before, and the harvests of the years accumulate inexorably ; and all lives have an end. None of us will face God very proudly, I imagine, but if we have paid in full for all we have received, if we have not wasted our days of living, if we have a comely life to show – why, it may be we will hear, without being filled with all hell's torments, God's careful explanation, His original purpose in putting us on earth at all – Lord, Brian, I suppose it comes to no more than this : what Peter and I prepare to do must be justified ; by our lives henceforth we must show that it was worth all it cost. My children also must have a Four Courts in Pelona, and a House to enter afterwards——'

Says Robert : ' Your eggs are cold and the grease on your bacon is white.'

' Have him take these away and fry some more,' says Brian, and went on with the letter, now in its

last paragraph. 'While you are in Pelona learn if the hollow stump above our swimming place is still standing ; and, if it is, build a fire in it. There are some things inside that I put there the day Louis came for me, but no daughter of mine will ever go to Pelona now and I would prefer to have the little treasures cleanly burnt. There were nine of them each wrapped carefully ; I can remember what eight of them were but not the ninth ; and now I have started to think about them and now I am crying. Stay there until spring, until this sorry business is done with. Perhaps you will be able, with that lovely land's help, to persuade Eleanor into marriage and those five children. I wish you all the good luck in the world and do you wish me the same. Good night, Elizabeth.'

So the letter ended.

Brian put it away and began to eat. Robert had already finished ; he had spread his map before him and on it he now placed six lumps of sugar, frowning thoughtfully over each lump. Brian took the last piece of toast and asked him what he was doing. Robert humped his heavy shoulder over the map.

'You give us six days to reach Pelona. Well, here is the first day, this lump here ; we will reach the Crossroads to-night. This is Clover Plains which we should reach in time for supper to-morrow. This third lump is Wallace. You will notice how much closer the lumps are now ; we will be entering the hill country. Friday night we should be at Placid River ; Saturday night we should sleep in the Huntsman at Windy Ridge and about twenty minutes after sunset Sunday we should be in the courtyard at Pelona.'

'Wet to the skin, mark my word.'

'It will probably be raining.'

Brian chased a sliver of bacon around his plate ; using only one hand made it more sporting, he discovered. ' That is hard riding.'

' You said six days.'

' I know.' He captured the bacon and crunched it with gusto. ' Francis has sent two men ahead of us.'

' Oh !'

' Yes.' Brian drew his coffee cup under his chin. ' They may get their feet wet, of course, and die of pneumonia, or they may fall off a cliff – nevertheless I think you had better find room on that map for two more lumps.'

Robert pulled at his moustache. ' They will make things interesting but they are not worth two days. Six is a good round number that I like.' He stared at his map. ' I can slit both their throats and still get you to Four Courts not later than sunrise Monday.'

' Do you want to keep them from killing me and then do it yourself? Two more lumps, Robert.'

' One. Only one.'

Brian, nose in cup, shrugged.

' Where shall I put it?'

Brian had got to his feet. He took a lump from the bowl, crushed it in his fist and then sprinkled it along their whole route. ' That does it. Now let us be starting.'

A servant helped him into his jacket and strapped on his spurs while Brian fastened his eagle to his chest. Belt, scabbard and blade, hat, gloves. Robert went downstairs but Brian put on a crimson silk scarf as a sling for his crippled hand, then admired the effect in a mirror until Robert whistled from the street.

CHAPTER XXV

THE house fronts of the King's Road that had been a bleak and sober-hued panorama moving past their elbows ended abruptly ; for a moment they rode smoothly across the market-place and for a shorter moment through the gate's shadow. Then the horizons fell back and the skies lifted with a rush and they trotted intrepidly out upon the plain. A blue sky, high and cloudless, filled all the space about them with sunshine hard and glittering as diamond and a cold wind settled against their right shoulder blades. Ahead of them and on both sides the snow covered everything with a completeness very trying to the eyes. Later Brian could pick out the few things the snow had not conquered, which remained a defiant brown or black in a world gone dazzlingly white : a jutting rock, weeds like leaning sticks, the hedges and trees which marked an orchard or a brook ; but for a while he rode with eyes half closed.

Assuredly she loved him. What the clear-eyed and level-headed woman Elizabeth certainly was found lovable in someone who had not read a book of any sort in ten years he, Brian, could never know for all his reading. She had more sympathy and wit in her fingertips than the illiterate boor could ever understand nor ever appreciate ; still, she loved him and was under no compulsion to explain why, to anyone.

But, reflected Brian, what love ! To Elizabeth Peter was not just a lover, pleasant to have around

now and then but not unique and not indispensable. He was, he meant, much more than that to her. She needed him; the possibility of a conscious existence without him she did not even consider and she was preparing to endure indescribable inconveniences to remain with him. Through him she was hoping to find a great deal which Brian sincerely prayed she would find, without any large confidence in either the efficacy of his prayers or Elizabeth's ultimate satisfaction. For it was, Brian felt pessimistically, a great deal to ask, not so much of Peter or of any other man but rather of life. The finding of this great deal which Elizabeth sought was not so much a proven impossibility as an infernally long chance. And Brian, for his part, abhorred gambling. Elizabeth might not. It was also possible that she might not agree with Brian that there was any other way out, anything else to do, for she loved Peter while to Brian Peter did not appear much more desirable than any one of half a dozen other young and unmarried men then in the city. But imagine a sensible woman confronted with the same problem. Imagine Eleanor. Of course I love you! she would exclaim, but, my dear Peter – Brian's imagination failed him there, but he was sure Eleanor's would not. She would tell him to go to the devil as he deserved.

But Eleanor was a widow while this was Elizabeth's first really serious affair. That made all the difference. He repeated: That makes all the difference, very firmly, because a line or two from her letter began to hammer protestingly at his brain. Love that strips you of selfishness and humour and pride and quite nakedly makes the stake less your heart's ease than your immortal soul's – was that in her letter? 'I know that love is not enough and

there are things that matter more. Living does go on. . . .’ He gave up trying to make the sentences roll as they should and got the letter out of his pocket. The wind ruffled the sheets of paper but he managed to read it all over again ; he read the penultimate paragraph twice and then he put the letter away, emotionally in much the same, unenjoyable state he had been the afternoon of the hunt, after he had waited to see how far they would go in spite of the weather. . . .

After a while he could hold his head up again.

Well ! It was, he decided, very good to be leaving the city. Let those who could not, stay ; he was going to Pelona and Pelona with Eleanor would be a little paradise. While Louis and Elizabeth played the increasingly dreary game to its end he would be lying under a tree, his head in Eleanor’s lap, or riding across the countryside or teaching Eleanor to swim. He would get his fill again on fresh milk, butter, eggs and cheese, of bird song and the dust of country roads, of sunshine on clear days and rainfall on the days when the rain moved in a slanting curtain down the valley. Louis had good reason to be envying him even if Louis did not remember how the world sparkled after a shower.

He turned in his saddle but a billow in the plain hid the city, though a soiled haze in the sky showed where it lay. He faced forward again. On their right the ground sloped down to a little stream, purling black between its snowy banks, then in a long rise to the horizon ; on their left it rose more sharply and there were a few trees for the wind to play with. Handfuls of snow were being whipped loose continually, with a sharp snapping of frozen branches. The road was good, not too deep with snow, the horses finding their way without much trouble.

When they came to a stretch of road the wind had swept comparatively bare they dismounted and walked, leading their horses. Merely walking was enough to keep bodies flexible and the blood moving; the stones frozen immovably to the road and the wagon ruts made it something of an adventure. They passed farmhouses, most of them set away from the road; usually a dog barked as they went by, bridles jingling. The road kept opening before them, curving, down a slope and then up again, trees here, a wall there, bushes which Brian remembered bore blackberries and elderberries in the summer-time, then a fence and open fields again; no end to the road or to the snow, continuous sameness and continual change.

‘It is good to be alive.’

‘Yes, sir, it is.’

‘Though my face feels as if it were made out of wood. I can hardly move my jaws. What cold!’

‘Me too.’

‘I am going to get down and walk again. My toes are frozen.’

He got down and strode ahead. The world became larger as soon as he touched his feet to the ground. The snow crunched under his boots, the plume of his breath waved before his face. He could feel his body warm inside its clothing; the wind pelted him with snow and he laughed because it could not harm him. ‘It is a beautiful day.’

Robert nodded.

‘I like winter. I like winter better than I like summer. Look at this sunshine; it is like cold water.’

‘I could do without this damned wind.’

They overtook a wagon piled with sacks of flour; the iron rims of the wheels were making

the snow shriek. The driver saluted them like an old soldier and smiled like a happy man; they returned the salute but they had to swing off the road to pass him. Toward noon they met half a dozen parties that had left the Crossroads at sunrise, coaches, sleighs, men on horseback. Half an hour later they waited while fifty soldiers rode by, every man brown from the southern sun and carrying each one his whole world in his saddle bags. Louis was calling in his legions. Brian did not know their captain though Robert thought he recognised him.

‘I am beginning to get hungry,’ Brian announced; ‘where can we get something to eat?’

Robert said that he had, in his time, eaten at both and the unpainted one was to be avoided. Farmers’ wives were poor cooks at best but this one was downright barbarous. The story was, Robert understood, that she had married him against her will and her housekeeping had suffered. The two-chimneyed one was, on the other hand, a famous exception. She was always having a baby.

So they stopped at the farmhouse with two chimneys and drank hot soup from bowls, reins over arms, standing in the snow. Brian found a silver piece for the farmer’s wife – who was plump and red-cheeked but did not appear to have a baby in mind – while her husband asked: Where were they from? The city, Brian said. And where were they going? To Pelona. Pelona? That was the only place for a man at this time of the year. Stop asking questions, says the farmer’s wife. Robert wanted to know: How was the road down that way? Open. Those are fine horses; you will reach the Crossroads before sunset. God speed you, sirs.

Brian said, later : ' We might have asked them about Francis's pair.'

' What could we have asked them ? If two men who looked as if they might be hired assassins went by ? '

' Oh.'

The afternoon passed slowly.

They entered the outskirts of the Crossroads just at sunset. They had covered the not-quite forty miles within the allotted time and without incident, and when Brian dismounted before the inn he knew he was tired. He looked back at the stretch of darkening world he had travelled with a sudden admiration for the Brian who had dared it. In the chill, ugly twilight it was inexpressibly lonely and wild, a frozen desolation, windy and cold. He waited back to the wind in the gathering darkness, for Robert to return from the stables ; for a shuddering half moment it was a winter night and he was far from home and it was not good to be alive. Then Robert appeared and a band of light fell across the snow as the inn door opened. The shadows fled.

Supper, gentlemen ? I recommend the roast beef to-night. With roasted potatoes and red cabbage. Coffee, surely. They ate before the fire, he and Robert, in the midst of unfamiliar faces and voices that with the lamplight insensibly merged into a drowsy haze out of which Robert's face appeared telling him it was time to go to bed. The cooler air of his bedroom awakened him a little ; he looked out of the window and noticed again how unutterably dreary are the lights of a strange village and the deserted streets of it ; then he undressed and fell asleep, the smell of a strange bed in his nostrils.

In the morning, early, after a good breakfast, they were on the road again.

CHAPTER XXVI

THAT day – Wednesday – passed much like the first; the good weather persisted though toward nightfall the wind seemed to get stronger. They had coffee and sandwiches in a small road-house at noon and reached the white-columned porch of the Golden Spur in good time for supper. Brian was relieved to find only a few cadets from the school in the tavern and no officers. His entrance stiffened the youngsters; while Robert cut his meat for him he noticed them eyeing his eagle and his crippled hand and wondered what sort of hero he must appear to them. None of them approached him. They left early. Brian salved his chapped lips and went to bed.

The next day they did not reach Wallace as they had planned; the road was bad and they battled a head wind all the way. The sun set drearily but they pushed on through the dusk until a feeble light appeared in a tangle of trees. It came from a small road-house and there they decided to put up for the night.

They regretted it instantly. The host who came out to add his bellow to the dogs' – there must have been a dozen of them all told, scrawny, half-starved beasts full of wind and viciousness – was a greasy lout; his stable made Robert curse and the food his wife dropped before them was untouchable. They fed on bread and wine. Above stairs was further misery; one glance at their beds made disrobing unthinkable, deadly. They slaughtered bed-bugs

and roaches, millions of them, all night, while the dogs moaned hideously outside.

At the first streak of dawn Robert went out to saddle the horses while Brian – haggard from hunger and loss of sleep – went in search of the host. He found him snoring beside his slut, both of them fully clothed, unwashed, disgusting. There was no water handy so Brian got him by the collar and with a strength enhanced by murderous fury dragged him out of bed and down the stairs. There Robert, who could bring two good and willing hands to the task, received him and, while the dogs went utterly mad, heaved him into a snowbank. Robert's suggestion that they do the same to the slut he chivalrously ignored. She had come out, scratching her head, and when she saw her husband she began to laugh. Brian and Robert mounted and went off like the wind, her laughter and his curses following them.

Two hours later they entered Wallace and found the mid-week horse market at its peak. The little square was filled with horses and men; blankets splashed colour lavishly and the keen wind found more in the faces of the men, large burly men who needed plenty of room to move around in, and never buttoned their coats. Brian and Robert crossed to the Trader's House, a clean-looking building of red brick with leaded windows and white-painted woodwork.

Its most famous room seemed to be crowded to the doors but Brian's eagle got them a table away from the door and at a window that looked out on the Square. Sunshine flowed through white curtains on immaculate linen and good silver; Brian realised that he was hungry and – still more pleasurably – that here was food to be had. The

‘murmur of much talk rose and fell; waiters went by with steaming trays; the frieze of paintings, horses and horsemen great in their time, glowed against the ancient woodwork like priceless museum pieces. Brian sighed. Once more it was undeniably good to be alive. He ordered breakfast for two and sat down.

‘It is decided,’ he says, ‘we stay here until to-morrow.’

‘But——’ says Robert, reaching for his map.

‘Placid River or nothing. I have killed enough bed-bugs to do me a lifetime.’

‘Placid River is a good twelve hours away.’

‘Fine. I will arrange for rooms later.’

Robert mourned his shattered schedule until the waiter came up, laden with fruit, sausages, buckwheat cakes and coffee. Brian spread his napkin and began to gorge.

‘I will say this,’ says Robert, wiping his moustache, ‘they know how to feed a man here.’

‘Pass the syrup.’

Robert passed the little pitcher with a horse’s head in a horseshoe painted on each plump cheek. ‘I usually stop at the Stallion or the Lucky Horseshoe up the street.’

‘You might go around there and see about our friends. I know they would not stop here.’

Robert nodded. Then he coughed. ‘We could use fresh horses.’

Brian pushed away his plate. ‘This is no time to be trading horses.’

‘I saw some damned fine stock out there and we will be in the hills to-morrow.’

Brian shrugged. ‘Go ahead, then. Up to twenty crowns. I am going to bed. A bath, a shave, clean linen – what felicity! Waiter.’ He beckoned.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘More coffee, please. And tell the host I want to see him.’

The waiter brought more coffee and the host, who bowed to the silver eagle and promptly offered its wearer the house. Brian asked discreetly about Eleanor. The host fingered his lips. Yes, a lady, a very beautiful and charming lady with four guards – Louis had been generous – had stayed here two nights ago. She had left for Placid River yesterday morning. No, she had not asked if there was any message and had left none. Though that, Brian reflected, was hardly to be expected. He asked for and got and slept until five o’clock in the room and bed she had occupied. But he dreamt of Louis.

When Robert awakened him the room was dark and cool. He stared drowsily at his boots, gleaming identically near the door, then rose and dressed. The dining room was moderately full but they seemed to advance through acres of bare tablecloth to their old table, where they had a supper of roast stuffed veal with hot apple roll for dessert, both very good. Brian pressed his nose against the glass of the window; the square outside was deserted and uninviting, one or two shops alight, only a few passers-by. It was much pleasanter inside, he decided. Robert mumbled on about Francis’s pair. He had asked: Were there any men from the city here? and they had told him: Yes, dozens. You see? But the horses were superb.

Brian called to the waiter. ‘This coffee,’ he explained, ‘is not quite hot enough. Will you get me some more?’ The waiter placed his cup in the exact centre of an enormous tray and bore it to the kitchen. Brian leaned back. ‘What is there to do in this town?’

Robert mentioned a gambling place, a cock fight of which great things were expected, another gambling place and a resort popularly known as the Mares' Nest. None of these would do, Brian decided. He felt royally at ease. There was a whole evening ahead of him to idle through, to go here or go there, do this or that, just as he wished. All Wallace waited on his pleasure because he, the stranger within its gates, alone had nothing to do but play. He could ask : What have you for me ? and then to say, without apology : I like this, I do not like that. He had no responsibilities and to the ancient and honourable city of Wallace no loyalties. He was a traveller, a bird on the wing. Brian pitied the townspeople who had to live here, who were not going to any particular place, who would lie down to sleep in the beds they had risen from that morning. To ride a good horse all day, to eat a good supper at the journey's end, to say hello in the evening and farewell in the morning - this was fine. It was the way for a young man to go.

Robert watched him put cream into his coffee, put one spoonful of sugar, and tugged at his moustache. His eyes gleamed. 'We could,' he says, 'play cribbage.'

'You and your cribbage.'

'We have not played since last summer.'

'This is fine coffee. Get the board.'

Robert went to get the board from his saddle bags while Brian sent out for new cards. They played in the smaller tap room until ten o'clock ; Robert, as usual, won. 'I will be glad to be on the road again,' says Brian, as they went upstairs. 'So will I,' says Robert.

This time Brian dreamt of Eleanor, poignantly. Next morning they had breakfast and were out

of town before the sun was up. As they rode the sky on their left paled and made the trees stand out, black and crooked against the morning. They went like shadows moving through a larger shadow, swiftly, almost silently. The horses were excellent beasts; they swung without urging into a long stride, running as if they enjoyed the wind in their faces and the iron road underfoot. The near roadside was a blur, the farther spaces invisible, until the sun came up and widened the world on either side of the running horses and gave them long shadows that flew with them effortlessly, all day.

Sunset found them still riding but the lights of Placid River blinked at the mouth of the valley and there could be no stopping now. Half an hour later they had clattered across the covered wooden bridge and got their first word of Francis's pair.

Robert gnawed at a pork chop. 'They were here last night, asked about us and left for Windy Ridge this morning. Either they will wait for us there or come to meet us on the mountains.'

'Upon my word I will be glad to see them.'

'Me too. More mustard,' says Robert to the waiter, who was gossiping familiarly with a coach driver at a near-by table. 'I like plenty of mustard with pork.'

'It helps it digest. Pork is very hard to digest. What do they look like?'

'They have yellow hair.'

'And swords and poniards and what else?'

'The stable boy says they are a short one and a big heavy one. They have money and were drunk as lords all night.'

The waiter found a place on the table for Robert's mustard. 'Maybe,' says Robert, plastering it on

his chop, 'maybe they will fall off a cliff. There are enough of them between here and Windy Ridge.'

'Not they. Drunk or sober they were born to be hung.' For a moment the noise of the tap room surged between them, then receded as Brian spoke. 'Will there be a moon to-night?'

'I never thought to look. Maybe the waiter knows. Hey, you.'

The waiter did not know. He asked the host, who groaned. One of the diners within hearing thought there might be a moon. Someone else chose to doubt it. The first diner, a hairy person who might have been a carpenter, put on the defensive, became certain there was a moon, a full moon, one of the brightest he had ever seen. He was promptly informed that there would not be a moon of any sort for weeks, if then, and also called a wood-butchering wind-bag. Everyone looked up, faces brightened; the argument was fairly started when fists began to pound on the table. While the din was at its height Robert went outside and returned. The night was frosty and clear, the sky filled with stars. There was no moon but there undoubtedly would be one later. The argument had evolved into a discussion of warts and the best time to plant potatoes.

Brian and Robert finished their supper quickly. Robert went out to the stables to see about getting fresh horses and sending the others on to Pelona; Brian called the host. 'I want a dozen beef sandwiches, two bottles of brandy and a bottle of very strong black coffee.'

'You are not leaving us to-night, sir?'

'I am.' He fingered his eagle. 'The king's business, you understand? Hurry.'

When the saddle bags were packed Brian put

on his hat and went out. Robert was waiting with two horses which stamped their hoofs and sniffed the cold air restlessly. Brian took a deep breath of it himself – it stung – and looked up at the hills. They were jagged with the trees on their crests, black, silent and menacing against the stars. Twenty-seven cruel miles deep in them lay the Huntsman, a bad ride at any time, at night, in winter, a hair-raising one. But if heaven proved kind they would accomplish it before sunrise and to have so magnificent a feat for a memory was worth – Brian decided – even the actual doing. It would not be something he had read about in a book written by a Latrenay the Younger ; it would be something he, Brian, had done. Nevertheless, he reflected, jerking down the brim of his hat and walking across the snow to his horse, nevertheless he would rather not have had to do it ; and climbing into his saddle he wished Francis and Francis's pair in hell.

‘ Good night, gentlemen,’ cried the host.

Brian waved a hand. The horses moved off. They heard someone say : ‘ Come in and finish your supper.’ Then the door closed. Brian and Robert rode out of the village and began the long, slow climb up the pass.

CHAPTER XXVII

HE was numb with cold and stupefied with weariness ; his flesh seemed frozen to his bones ; he rode slumped in his saddle, eyes closed, swaying dangerously, half dead. He had ceased to believe in his own reality or the world's. He was a damned soul condemned to climb eternally a frozen mountain. He existed not as a living man riding a horse but as a disembodied brain, a released consciousness drunk with freedom and plunging into a bacchanalia with phantoms. All the existence he could lay claim to was the rubbish his memory was dragging forth. There was a past and a future but no present ; he ranged the earth and heavens but not the rock and snow his horse trod. Faces floated before him and words without meaning rang in his ears. He hummed a song secretively, like a contented madman ; first he hummed the song of the western wind and the small rain and then he listened while Eleanor's voice sang the song he had written for their first night together. Then the song faded and there was only the wind purring in his ears ; and then he was listening to Elizabeth cry in a broken-hearted way because she would never go to Pelona again. In Pelona he was standing before Louis of Basil, who had just arrived from the city ; he was very tall and very well dressed. All about them was sunlight and grass and Louis was saying : You are coming with me to the city to-morrow. And the sunlight was dying in the sky, the grass underfoot was turning black, while he listened. He was lonely and

afraid in the house on the Long Lane that Louis had given him, very young, crying sometimes in his bed at night because he did not know what the world expected of him. Some years were to pass before he learned to be Brian of Malvern and to teach the world to expect, from him, anything. He was standing in Praen's drawing-room, awkward, abashed, forlornly certain that he would be going home alone again that night, wretched with the ecstasy and misery almost any handsome woman in a low-necked gown could fill him with. He was fighting that hard-headed Loveland brat ; the dust of the barrack's floor was in his mouth and his head was ringing and he was insane with rage—but Loveland was down, spitting blood. He was sick in his bed ; for five days he lay on his back watching the shadows move and play across the ceiling, too languid even to wonder if he was going to die. It was a Sunday afternoon in August and he was riding across a glaring, baking Elder Place to dismount before Irene's house. There was not a breath of wind, not a bird chirped ; the city was like an oven. But Irene was waiting for him, clothed for hot weather, in a room that was cool within drawn shades and smelled of lilac toilet water. He was in Daniel's cellar watching the first number of *The Triumverate* come off the press with a poem of his printed upside down on the second page. He had just come out of his house and something in the evening air made him sniff and look up and down the lane and think : Summer is over, winter will soon be here. He was eating with half a dozen men in the White Star ; bacon was frying, there was a pervasive smell of fresh coffee and the windows were pink with sunrise. He was watching a red-headed girl dressed in very little dance on a table while he

played his own composition, 'Lust Is Not Love,' not as well as he had played it before. He was standing in West Lane ; it was after midnight and the snow was gathering around his ankles, and Eleanor, wrapped in white, was saying : You had better be going home, Messer Brian. He was riding a cliff's edge, he would ride a cliff's edge for ever and ever, through a night that would never end. Eleanor ! Eleanor !

He opened his eyes. Very bright moonlight bathed the other sheer wall of the canyon and left the depths where, turbulently, Placid River belied its name, black. They had penetrated into a lost, unfinished corner of the world, all rocks, precipices and space. Enormous crags leaned over them ; the wind howled among the upper peaks and icy gusts swept the men and horses frequently.

Let us, he thought, fighting for sanity, let us be sensible. He shook his head to clear it, then stopped his horse. Robert stopped too. Brian got down ; he found he could hardly stand and his head was whirling. Robert was saying something but it did not matter. Brian took off his one glove, using his teeth, and stooped over, feeling the ground until he found what he sought. His fingernails dug into the snow about the rock, his spurs rang as he kicked at it ; the mountain, the whole earth seemed fastened to its under side. Another kick freed it and clutching it in his hand he straightened, mounted his horse again. ' All right, Robert.'

' What were you doing ?'

Brian picked up his reins, still holding his rock. ' I was getting a charm against phantoms.'

' What ?'

It was rough and cold in his hand, hard and unfriendly and unlovely. But he cherished it for its

virtues which a philosopher, had there been one so unlucky as to be present, might deny, citing this authority and that, spilling words into space as Brian heaved him off the cliff. 'A rock,' says Brian, 'a rock with snow on it.'

They rode on. Brian murmured: 'I often dream of this place. The road is not over a foot wide and the canyon is miles deep and I go half mad with terror before I awake. But I wish I was in my bed now, dreams or no dreams.'

'Not much longer now.'

'About an hour.'

'Just about.'

'A long way from home, Robert, a long way from home.'

Robert's answer was lost in a blast that swooped down on them. Brian gasped and lowered his head. The horses lost a step, then plodded on steadily as before. The moon had reached her zenith and begun to fall.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THEY came out, suddenly, on the rim of the cliffs that walled three sides of the Huntsman's valley. This was a U-shaped depression, probably the bed of an ancient waterfall, with its open end like a door into the south country. The starlight was enough to show them the tavern, a four-chimneyed building squatting on the level floor of the valley. It must have been a sheer drop of five hundred feet, the cliffs rising from the grass roots as vertically as a wall made by man and as smooth as iron. The road they were travelling swept down in three great curves, a jagged scar on the side of the mountain. The horses trotted down it without urging.

The valley was windless and quiet. At its open end the sky hung like a dark curtain studded with stars ; elsewhere the cliffs rose enormously high and without a break. The horses' hoofbeats echoed against them and made the only sound in all the night's vast silence. The air was dry and cold. Brian wondered what seemed so queer about the ground ; then discovered it. There was no snow ; the horses were walking across half-frozen turf.

They rode up to the tavern and dismounted. ' Well, says Brian, ' here we are. '

A lantern burned above the door ; the windows, set deep in thick stone walls, were dark. Robert peered into one while Brian stretched his legs. ' Nobody in there. '

' We may as well go in. '

The air inside was stale and smoky. A fire

smouldered on the hearth ; on a table near it were empty bottles, soiled plates and cups. The room was not large but it extended the full height of the building ; a balcony made of untrimmed wood in the rustic style encircled it. The bedroom doors along it were all closed. The Huntsman slept.

Brian threw open a window. 'I am glad to be here but the air on the mountains is better. Find someone ; I want coffee.'

Robert went into the kitchen ; his voice rose and then protesting rumbles from the cook. Brian took off his glove, pulled a chair close to the hearth and began to annoy the fire.

'I asked him if a big heavy northman and a small one were staying here ; he thought there might be. I told him they had money and were probably drunk last night ; he said they are sleeping in number five.'

Brian glanced up at the balcony. 'Which is number five ?'

Robert did not know. In the kitchen the cook was starting a fire clamorously. Fresh cool air flowed in through the open window. Brian yawned. 'It would be a good joke if we went to bed and they started back for Placid River.'

'Would you let them ?'

'What would you have me do ? Go upstairs and pin them to the mattress ?'

'They would do it to you if they could.'

'But I am not an assassin. Did you order breakfast ?'

'I forgot.'

Robert went back into the kitchen. Later the cook came out, rubbing a bristly chin, and spread a cloth. The minutes passed. Brian dozed. He opened his eyes when the cook pushed a cup of steaming coffee against his elbow. 'Where is my orderly ?'

‘Gone out to the stables, sir.’

He was drinking coffee luxuriously when Robert came in. Through the open door back of Robert’s shoulders he could see how pale the sky had become. The night was fading ; it would soon be day again. Robert sat down.

After a while he says : ‘There is a coach with a missing wheel and six horses out there.’

‘What of it?’

‘The horses are branded with a B ; the coach has the Basil arms on each door.’

Brian put down his cup. ‘By God——’ He rose. ‘Get the host. I am going out to the stables.’

He went out, bareheaded, and around the tavern to the stable in the rear. There, in the gloomy, aromatic interior he found a coach propped up with the left hind wheel missing. It was Louis’s smaller one ; Brian had ridden in it many times. He began to grin. He walked around it several times ; he opened a door and inspected its interior like a prospective buyer ; then, still grinning, slammed the door and went back to the tavern.

‘Did you find him?’ he asked, entering.

The cook said, smiling like an uncle : ‘Number nine, sir, is the lady’s room.’

Robert said, glumly : ‘Look up there.’

Beverly said : ‘Good morning, Brian.’

Brian gaped at the man on the balcony. ‘Beverly ! What the devil——’

The poet walked along the balcony and started down the stairs. ‘Eric will be out in a minute. Breakfast for two, my lad ; we will eat at this gentleman’s table.’ Then he came toward Brian, hand outstretched. ‘Believe, me Brian, I am glad to see you.’

Brian shook his hand. 'What the devil are you doing here?'

'That, now, is a story for you. What have you done to your hand?'

'A little accident; nothing serious.'

'Did you ride here during the night?'

'Yes.'

'From Placid River?'

'Of course.'

'What in God's name made you do such a hare-brained thing?'

'Was it you who asked about us back there?'

'Not me, Eric. Why?'

Brian looked at Robert. 'Then where are they?'

Robert shrugged. Beverly asked: 'Where are who?'

'The assassins Francis sent out to meet us.'

'Francis?' Beverly's lips twisted though he did not smile. A door slammed thunderously above them. 'Oh, there is Eric.'

Eric boomed: 'Hello there, Brian you dog! Where the devil did you come from?' and tramped like an army along the balcony and down the stairs. He crushed Brian's fingers remorselessly in the friendliest manner imaginable. 'What has happened to your hand?'

'A little accident; nothing serious.' Brian was beginning to be a trifle bewildered by their extraordinary welcome; they behaved as though they had not seen him for years.

'You should have been here last night; what a time we would have had! Beverly, does he know who is upstairs?'

'He means your duchess, Brian.'

'What do you do to make them so mad about you that they will not even look at another man?'

Upon my soul I went to bed sick ; absolutely sick of hearing about you. Brian this and Brian that—damn Brian, said I, and drank myself silly to forget your confounded name. Ask Beverly.’

‘ I can imagine what an evening you made for her.’

‘ Breakfast, gentlemen.’

Somewhere the cook had found a clean napkin and with this draped over an arm he stood near their table, laden to its edges with four breakfasts. Chairs scraped, napkins waved like flags. ‘ Close that window,’ says Beverly ; ‘ I have not been out on the mountains all night.’

‘ We would still be in bed,’ says Eric. ‘ but there was the most horrible crash on the roof. I began to think the mountain was falling.’

‘ So he awoke me,’ says Beverly.

‘ Next time I shall let you die.’

Brian looked at Robert. ‘ That must have been the rock I threw. If I had known it would disturb you——’

Eric stared. ‘ Throwing rocks ? You must be totally mad.’

‘ What was I to do ? I had no more use for it.’

‘ What made you leave Placid River ? ’

‘ First tell me why you are here. Or is it so unimportant ? ’

Eric grunted, mouth full. Beverly buttered a roll carefully. ‘ Do you think I would ride day and night in the dead of winter if it was unimportant ? ’

‘ How do I know what you would do ? ’

‘ I suppose you think we were running away from something.’

‘ You suppose incorrectly. I am not thinking at all.’

‘ Well, we were not. But it was a ride, let me tell you.’

‘When did you leave the city?’

‘Years ago.’

‘Tuesday night at – what time was it, Eric?’

‘One o’clock.’

Brian lifted a forkful of scrambled eggs to his mouth. ‘Why?’

‘Oh——’ says Beverly, waving a hand.

‘Go on, tell him,’ says Eric, reaching for another roll.

‘Well——’

Robert said in an undertone: ‘They must have passed us while we were in that lousy place near Wallace.’

Brian nodded. Eric said: ‘Get up, Beverly.’

‘Get up?’

‘Yes, on your feet.’

‘What for?’

Eric reached out an arm and hoisted him off his chair. Then he leaned against the table, laid his fork against his chest and bowed to Brian. ‘Your Highness, our most sincere respects.’ Then he sat down and resumed eating. ‘How was that?’ he wanted to know.

Brian chewed mechanically. ‘For pity’s sake——’

Beverly stirred his coffee. He did not raise his eyes. ‘Well, here it is. The evening of the day you left the city I killed Francis.’

‘In the White Star,’ Eric added.

‘Under the elk’s head. You remember the elk’s head?’

‘As neatly as the thing was ever done.’

‘Through the heart, Eric?’

‘Precisely.’

Their voices sounded very far away to Brian. He murmured: ‘And Elizabeth?’

‘Elizabeth? Oh – you mean Louis of Basil’s

daughter? I do not know anything about her, Brian. We left immediately.'

'You do not know anything about Elizabeth?'

'How should I? Why do you ask?'

'She and Peter,' says Brian, 'are lovers.'

Beverly's head jerked. 'Lovers? Those two? Hell.'

Eric says: 'Lovers? Has the monk got himself a mistress at last?'

'Eric, keep quiet.'

Eric was looking at the ceiling, at the walls, running his hand through his hair, unable to absorb all at once the full meaning of this latest piece of news. 'And that woman out of all the women in the world. And this time of all times. Oh, may I be damned!'

'Eric, if you do not keep still——'

Eric shook his huge head. 'Damn me, how can I keep still? Am I made of wood?' Then: 'Where is Brian going?'

Brian sighed. 'I am going out for a breath of air.'

CHAPTER XXIX

BACK of the mountains the rising sun was throwing up great splashes of colour, red, violet and orange, one after the other, and each splash rose higher and brighter than the last. The cliffs were tipped with gold. A light breeze dipped into the valley; it stirred the hair on his brow and fluttered the sleeves of his shirt, chilling his damp arm-pits. There was a smell of spruce and pine in it, mountain water and morning, clean, fresh, alive. At his feet last summer's grass was brown and dry but he looked to where had hung the star-studded curtain and glimpsed, miles away, the green slopes of Pelona. Long, perfectly straight shafts of sunlight were dropping into the mists that still clung to the river there; they would pierce them, drink them up and then shatter into a thousand rippling glints as the world came awake, meadow, hill and roadside, more beautiful, more desirable than it had ever seemed before. And Francis was dead. . . . A young man was dead and the sun was rising on a world that had never been so beautiful before, so expressly made for young men; young men strutting in the sunlight, riding a good horse down a road that had no end, young men on horseback with a sword at their sides and their chins up. . . .

He would have liked to raise his arms to that glorious morning sky wherein might be, at that, a living god, omnipotent, all-wise, understanding. But what good would it be? There was never any response, never. So he sat down on a rock and

buried his face in his arms because his stomach felt queer and it had never occurred to him how quickly one could die. Death's wing brushed you and you died ; and death was cruel, but crueller, far more dreadful, was the fact that all about your quieted flesh the still-living world went on unchanged in any important essential. Days and nights not much different from those you had known would come and go ; other sunrises and other dusks follow each other pleasantly and with no apparent end. But you would not be one of those to whom this mattered, to whom the sunshine was warm and the wind cold and the rain wet. You would be away somewhere ; you would be dead. And once you were dead you would never again know what it was to live. You would never again eat early breakfast in the White Star or put on new clothes after a warm bath or ride down the King's Road at noon of a Saturday ; or watch the snow fall into the glow of Daniel's shop windows or play a flageolet or help Eleanor undress. You would be dead. Ah - death was horrible. He did not want to die ; he wanted to live. And he was alive. Brian lifted his head and stared at the dawn. Never before had it felt quite so good merely to be alive. . . .

He sat there in the wind and sunshine, soaking in life, until Beverly called from the doorway. ' We are leaving now, Brian.'

Brian walked across the dead grass to the tavern. He leaned his back against it, hand in pocket. ' Where are you going ?'

Beverly was pulling on his gloves. ' My father has a place in Western Lucé. We will stay there for a while. The hunting is very good.'

' Are you going to annoy Louis with plots and intrigues ? I warn you it will be no use.'

‘No, nothing like that.’ Beverly gazed soberly across the valley. ‘You know, I felt all along that something was missing. I had killed a man and nothing happened. Oh – I knew that Peter would probably go but that is not what I mean. A man was dead and it did not seem to matter much to anyone ; and it is horrible for a man’s death to be entirely meaningless. But now – I have not felt his blood on my hands but I do feel on them now Elizabeth’s tears. You understand, Brian ? My sword not only pierced his heart but another that still lives. Francis’s death is dignified into tragedy after all.’

Brian stroked his bandaged hand ; it still hurt a little. ‘Why did you kill him ?’

Their horses were being led out. ‘I told him an ode he had written was rubbish and he could not agree with me.’

‘And was it ?’

Beverly reached for the hanging reins. ‘He died for it but I must still insist that it was a very bad ode. Yet who knows ? He might have amounted to something for it is not every poet who will do what he did. Well——’

Eric came out. ‘Another day in the saddle ! Damn me if I will be any use to the woman I marry after all this riding.’

Beverly had already mounted. ‘Good-bye, Brian. We may be in the city this summer ; till then——’

‘Good-bye, Beverly.’

Eric grasped his hand. ‘Good-bye, Brian. Give my love to that duchess of yours. I am sorry as a dog about Elizabeth. Still, he is not a bad sort and if they love each other——’

‘Shut up, Eric, and get on your horse.’

‘Brian, I will wring that poet’s neck before we are finished. Well, good-bye.’

‘ Good-bye.’

Brian waved his good hand and they rode off toward the high valley door. When the two horses, diminutive toys at the cliffs’ feet, had disappeared, he went into the tavern. One or two guests, still sleepy-eyed, had come down and stared at him curiously. Brian ignored them and went slowly up the stairs, to number nine.

CHAPTER XXX

HE had to knock twice before the door cracked open, wide enough to give him a view of Marna's nose, her right eye and a profusion of white lace which she was clutching to her breast. The eye blinked. 'What a surprise, Messer Brian!' she exclaimed in a whisper, and swung the door open.

The room he entered, softly, was no richer in elegancies than most tavern rooms but it was cool, high-ceilinged and airy. The wind fluttered the small curtain at the open window; the floor was bare scrubbed wood with woven rugs here and there, the walls a plain white which reflected every change in the sunshine. Eleanor's clothes seemed to be everywhere; slippers and boots on the floor, dresses and petticoats on the chairs, combs and jars on the commode. He recognised almost everything and felt at home, a whole man once more, as if the five days just past had been a rather bad dream and life was beginning over again. This was journey's end; wherever Eleanor might be there was journey's end and home for him. He understood that now, with a queer tightening of the throat, as his eyes strayed to the bed.

Marna stood smiling at him. He whispered: 'Is she still asleep?'

The maid nodded. 'Shall I awaken her?'

'No. You dress and get her breakfast.'

'Are we leaving to-day?'

'To-morrow. Was she hurt when the wheel came off?'

‘Oh, no. It went like this, Bump! and the coachman yelled something and my lady said, Good Lord! Then we got out and walked; it happened just as we were coming around that last curve. What has happened to your hand, Messer Brian?’

‘Nothing much. Will you bring me a cup of black coffee when you come up with her breakfast? My stomach feels upset.’

The maid pattered into a corner of the room and began to dress. Brian approached the bed and after he had made sure that Eleanor was asleep he sat down on its edge carefully. She was lying on her side, turned toward the window. One heavy braid of hair rested against her throat and framed her profile in black. It was a very lovely profile; her cheek curved softly – he remembered how beautifully it fitted into the palm of his hand – her small nose was delicately made and her mouth seemed tender. Her lashes were extraordinarily long. The blankets seemed to soar over her hips and covered all of her but her head and one bare shoulder.

Journeys end in lovers’ meetings. Journeys end in the Huntsman on Windy Ridge just after sunrise of what promises to be a fine day with Brian sitting on the edge of Eleanor’s bed and wondering if Eleanor will marry him. For he was not at all sure that she would and before this uncertainty he felt helpless and acutely miserable. Would she have him? Could he make her understand how completely he loved and needed her? He must. In the past he had speculated, infrequently, on the woman he would eventually marry. He had not wasted much thinking on it. One married, when the time arrived, because it was expected of one; or because one’s parents talked one into it; or because one had got

the girl into trouble ; or because one had no luck and it was the only way one could get a woman to sleep with. Love, it seemed to Brian, reviewing the weddings of the past few years, had not been mentioned often. Most people appeared to consider it something youngsters had to go through while growing up or as something that happened – like serious accidents – to strangers. Now and then one did encounter a marriage so spectacularly inept that no one felt any hesitation about mentioning it ; and it usually came out that they had married against their parents' wishes, in the face of the whole world's disapproval ; in short, it had been a love match.

And – likewise in the past – one had said, with a certain putrid nonchalance, that when you come to marry almost any woman will do ; but now he could only hope that Eleanor had forgotten it. He wanted Eleanor and no one else ; he wanted her to marry him and he wanted her for no other reason but that he loved and needed her. He wanted her with the desire of a sinner for paradise, painfully ; he wanted her with an overwhelming and pig-headed insistence that was almost fury. He felt he would strangle her or hang himself if she refused and rather late in the day he wished he came to her a better man. He remembered the boy who had used to ride in the Royal Square of a Sunday afternoon, proud as ten devils, lonelier than a hangman and aching for a pretty woman to worship.

Brian sighed and slid to his knees beside the bed. After a while he put his good arm around her and laid his cheek against her breast and shut his eyes. Eleanor began to push him away immediately. Then her eyelashes lifted and she exclaimed, with a happy note in her voice that sent a shiver down his spine : ' Brian ! '

She turned over so that their faces were close together, in the shelter of her arm and hair. He smiled into her eyes. 'I am home again.'

'How did you get here?'

'On a horse.'

'Over those mountains at night? Brian, you will be the death of me.'

'It was nothing. Will you marry me, Eleanor?'

'Marry you? Of course not.' She was studying his face. 'You look tired, Brian, and your face is all wind-burned.'

'All the way here I was thinking of the moment when I could lay my head on your breast. I thought I would have to wait until I reached Pelona. But heaven was good to me, better than I deserved.' He smiled again and moved a little. Eleanor glimpsed the scarf. 'Why are you wearing that scarf?'

'Why does anyone wear a scarf?' He leaned against the bed, hiding his hand, but Eleanor thrust out an arm and slipped her hand down to his injured one. 'Your hand is hurt!' She sat up in bed, spilling blankets. 'Brian, what have you done to your hand?'

'A little accident; nothing serious.'

'Let me see.' She bent toward him. Brian lifted the shoulder strap of her nightgown back into place and touched her cheek lightly. Eleanor gazed into his eyes. 'Please, Brian, let me see your hand.'

'There is nothing to see. Look. The bandage is only an ornament. Lie down, Eleanor, before you catch cold.'

'How did it happen?'

His fingers could not keep away from her; he watched her lips while she spoke and touched her hair and then tried to make her lie down. 'I will

tell you later. Do lie down, Eleanor.' He pressed her back and drew up the covers again.

'Does it hurt much? Will your hand be—'

'Lord, Eleanor, it is only a broken finger. What hurts is that I cannot hold you in my arms properly.' The scent of her hair was around him again; once more it was as if he had broken into a perfumed cloud that hung about her, wherever she went.

'Will you marry me, Eleanor?'

'No. Have you had breakfast?'

'If we married we could have children. I would like to have sons, Eleanor.' Under his cheek her breast was warm and living. He could hear her heart beat. 'I do love you, Eleanor.'

Her hand was in his hair. 'Brian.'

'What?'

'It is not just because you like to sleep with me?'

'No — it is not only that.'

'Or because you think I am the princess you used to dream about? I have not been fair to you, Brian. Before you came——' She smoothed his hair then rumbled it again. 'Even my sister noticed it.'

'Noticed what?'

'That I have changed.'

'Have you? But I have too.'

Eleanor had turned her head and was staring out of the window. Sunlight filled the valley. Down in the yard the travellers were leaving; they were talking and shouting back and forth above the sound of moving horses and coach wheels, making a great deal of fuss, Brian thought, about going from one place to another, frittering away their days, missing that peace which comes only to the

man who has reached home and will do no more wandering. Eleanor murmured ; a soft drawl : ' I want to marry you, Brian. I think I want to marry you even more than you want to marry me. I want to be Brian of Malvern's wife. Hush ! But whatever changes love makes, whatever your effect on me - I am still Eleanor. Independently of you I have lived for a quarter of a century and made myself what I am.'

' Of course. It is you I love.'

' Do not interrupt me. I am not the princess you dreamed about ; I am not, I think, even the woman I have been since you came. Though how can I know ? I have a past, memories, that you can never obliterate. I come to you full-formed, myself, not a part of you, my own, not yours. Brian, Brian, can we ever see each other without love in our eyes ?'

' Why should we try ? We can never be the same to each other, can we ? With each other we shall always be more patient, kinder, better humoured and nobler than with anyone else. We are not in love with anyone else.' He tightened the arm that lay across her. ' I do love you, Eleanor, I give you my word of honour. I need you ; I need your laughter and the tenderness in your eyes and your good sense and the sound of your voice - I need all of you.' He wished he could have put into words what he had felt that midnight in West Lane. ' I do not know how to say it, Eleanor. The one way I could show you would be to live with you for years and years.'

' Will you always let me be proud of you, Brian ?'

' What is there to be proud of ?'

' Always be brave and tender and much more

clever than you try to make people think. Be kind to me——'

'Kind to you? Oh, my dear——' He buried his face in her hair. 'Why will you not let me be humble, Eleanor? I am not at all good enough for you. Twenty years from now——'

'You must always remember how proud I am of you.'

'You will marry me, Eleanor?' He had lifted his head and was looking down into her eyes. 'You will let me care for you and serve you and love you? Please, Eleanor, will you marry me?'

She was stroking his cheek. 'You need a shave.'

'And I am tired and my knees hurt and I want to go to bed. But first tell me that you——'

'You must go to bed right away. Let me get up. I will have Marna change this bed and you can sleep here, where I can watch you. And after you have slept——'

'I must know now.'

She looked at him. 'Why?'

'Because.'

'Because why?'

'Because – because I must know now.'

Eleanor rose on one elbow. Marna had entered with a tray. 'On the table, Marna; I will be up in a minute.' Then she looked at Brian. 'Why are Beverly and Eric here?'

He sighed. 'Francis is dead. Beverly killed him.'

'Francis is dead?'

'Yes.'

Her eyes did not waver. 'Well, Brian?'

'You know what it means.'

'I want you to tell me.'

He touched her cheek. 'Francis is dead, may God have mercy on his soul. Peter and Elizabeth have

gone west – and may God give her a small part of what she hopes to find. Louis is king ; and when Louis dies——’

They stared into each other’s eyes. Brian tried to smile. Eleanor said : ‘ Your mother is dead, isn’t she, dear ? What would she think, do you suppose, if she could know ? ’

‘ Does it matter ? You will marry me, Eleanor ? ’

A bare hand and arm had slipped around his neck. Eleanor pressed toward him, her cheek warm against his own. Her lips were close to his ear. ‘ No one will ever call you Louis’s bastard again, will they, Brian ? I remember that was why I always watched you when we happened to be in the same drawing room together, before I learned to love you. You have a sad face, Brian ; did you know it ? ’

‘ Have I ? You have a lovely one, the loveliest face and heart and soul I have ever known. Will you marry me ? Or must I shake it out of you ? ’

He caught her by a shoulder and pressed her flat against the bed. Under the thin stuff of her night-gown her breast rose and fell. She looked at him unflinching. ‘ So you are a prince after all.’

‘ And you are the princess I dreamt about. Say yes.’

She threw up her arms in complete surrender ; beneath the bedclothes her body moved, tautened. ‘ I love one Brian with all the heart I have ; what shall I do when there are two ? ’

He whispered as their lips met : ‘ We shall manage somehow.’

That was journey’s end.

Later, it was he that lay in the bed and Eleanor who stood beside it, looking down. She had put on the orange-coloured wrap ; a heavy braid of hair

lay across it, reaching below her breast. 'Go to sleep,' she says.

'Where are you going?'

'I will be here. I will not leave you. When you awake I shall be here, waiting for you. Now go to sleep.' She bent down and kissed him; her hair brushed his cheek.

But when he awoke it was night and she was beside him. Moonlight filled the valley now. He stared at the ceiling. It seemed to him that he had forgotten something, that some task had been left unfinished, some question left unanswered. He had once gone searching in books, in men, in cathedrals, for – what? What was it he had wanted? He murmured and moved his head on the pillow, troubled. Something had been very wrong once, with the world, with life, with himself; and something, he had then felt sure, could be, must be, done. He had even put it, more or less satisfactorily, into words. What was it he had said that evening on the north porch of the cathedral? I miss in you what I miss in the Cardinal – revolt. Neither of you tried very hard.

Brian lifted his arm and clenched his fist. Had he tried hard enough and was this the answer? Was this the answer: love, a wife, children? For a brief moment complete bewilderment and a faint shame mastered him; then he lowered his arm. He looked at the window, at the moonlit night and the stars. And after a while he shrugged.

For he was content enough. The restlessness, the troubling and uncertainty of the spirit which had made a few weeks of his life unhappy might be the workings of a larger force than he could comprehend or – to be decently frank – care to meddle with. The contentment might be only a notice that the

force had cast him aside as an instrument not sturdy enough for its purpose, not a glorious finish but certainly not an ignoble one. He could feel a brief, poignant shame—and shrug. There would be others more eager and more fit to immolate themselves, to be consumed with these prophetic fires – and all honour to their unhappy souls for they would never find contentment or peace, no, not until God walked the dusty earth and the skies parted to reveal what lay on the other side. For himself this was the answer: love to link the years, a wife to bear him company, children to give him as much immortality as a man could win. All things considered, Brian was content enough. Life was too short.

The breeze moved the curtains at the window; in the valley was the silence of the mountains. The darkness was filled with the scent of Eleanor's hair. She murmured in her sleep, then came awake as he put his good arm under her and drew her yielding body close.

They left for Pelona in the morning.

CHAPTER XXXI

DURING the ensuing months Louis wrote, a few times to Brian, mostly to Eleanor.

To Eleanor :

I shall not say I like your letters. Let me put it the better way. I like your mind. Good writing is a sign of clear thinking. Muddy thoughts, many words, no sense. I will introduce you to my library when you get back. For you will be returning soon ; it is fine in Pelona in June but you will not want to be there in July. I can remember to this day the hot and dusty drowsiness of the courtyard and the yellow road outside. Though Brian tells me he has taught you to swim and if one is chin-deep in lake water even a Pelona July can be endured. But I want both of you here with me. The news about your swimming – with a word or two on the way you dive – was the only thing in Brian's last letter that I found worth reading. Tell him so ; he will understand why. But I like your letters.

To Eleanor :

You surprised me from the first ; you keep surprising me. I was never a wild admirer of Brian's taste in women – that young man would be offended to learn how much amusement he still furnishes me – but this time I bow to his luck. Mind, I say luck. He is too young to know how good heaven has been to him.

You surprised me, I mean, when I came to your house on West Lane to send you away. Until then you had been simply that black-haired widow who was letting Brian make love to her and incidentally making trouble for me. I have a short way with anything that annoys me. Well, I was prepared for tears, for shrugs, for a torrent of fury and words ; but the first thing you said, you may remember, was : Has anything happened to Brian ? And I looked at you and I thought : Why, she loves the whelp. Perhaps that should not have surprised me, but it did.

Why should it have surprised me ? I am not sure I know. Maybe I was yielding to the human instinct which makes it hard for us to believe anything good of our neighbours. And then I have always considered a young and intelligent widow very nearly the finest sort of woman nature and culture between them can produce, while I have never thought Brian particularly worthy of any woman's love. But then very few men have been worthy of the girls who consented to marry them.

They overcame that handicap of course. A woman with ten wedding anniversaries behind her is her husband's masterpiece. I suppose there is always an angel somewhere to weep a little.

To Eleanor :

The Cardinal paid me a visit to-day. He has become a little fatter and redder ; to do the man justice, his flair for good wine and good cooking is of a decidedly superior order. His conversation, however, remains uninspiring. I cherish him because he is one of the few men still living with whom I can remember my own youth. He was one of the

crowd; and what men and what days those were!

At that time Charles had military ambitions but I prevailed upon him to do otherwise. Shall I tell you why? Because I loved the army and I did not want to see him wearing its colours; he did not seem to me man enough. Since then I have often wondered how things would have turned out if I had kept still. One does meddle light-heartedly with other people's lives at twenty-four. But I usually decided I had done well. Any man who can be spoiled as his old women have spoiled him – or lets himself be talked into turning priest when he wants to be a soldier. . . .

He came in wanting to know what I was doing to Roland's statue down in the Square. I told him I was putting through a suggestion of Brian's and having the name on its base chiselled off. He says, pouring himself some wine, that it was not such a bad idea. I made him pour me a glass and then I told him that there would be a new name cut into the stone. Whose? Why, says I, Basil the Third's.

After five minutes or so he says: Is that all it comes to? Of course he has been dead for a long time but I always admired that old northman. He was such a good soldier.

I said, Yes, he was. Then I says: You wanted to be a soldier yourself once, Charles.

He said: Do you remember that?

Do I remember it? I argued you out of it.

He said: You argued me out of it? Nonsense.

No nonsense at all, I said. It was I who talked you out of it. We were in Lucia's place on the Long Lane and it was a damned cold night. You were half drunk. I was sober, or anyhow I was soberer than you.

He said : Louis, you may sincerely believe that something you said to me in a bawdy house influenced me but I know better. There are things a man must decide for himself. I might almost say, he says, looking very ecclesiastical, that they are decided for him.

Well ?

To Brian :

As I wrote to Eleanor I will want both of you back in the city before June ends. I have work for you and Eleanor will make the palace livable. There is no one like a woman to do that. You can marry her in Pelona or wait until this coming winter. It would provide the Square with something to do if the wedding was held here ; however, it is a decision you must leave to Eleanor. I am keeping open the house on Vintners Lane but you will want to get rid of yours and I presume Eleanor will want to sell hers also. Talk it over with her and begin to think of returning. We will have a whole summer to ourselves ; I do not expect to hold a formal court before Christmas week.

I have heard from Elizabeth once. She wrote me late in April that they are settled and happy after a rather bad journey. The county has accepted Peter as the new Duke ; they know nothing of the happenings in the city and — like most of the provinces — will not hear of them until summer opens the roads. She tells me Peter is growing a beard and young Roland has gained twelve pounds. She sends you and Eleanor her love.

I miss her a good deal. I suppose I could miss Francis more. He was my son and yet—— Looking back I cannot see wherein I failed to be a good father

to him, though this may be a not-inhuman short-sightedness. But it was always my rule to tinker as little as possible with my children's lives, to let them stand on their own feet. I really knew very little about Francis ; I never knew him as I know you and Elizabeth. There was never any intimacy between us ; he never offered it and I did not demand it. I often wonder now if he ever was lonely ; he seems to have had few friends. But he never invited affection ; there was a hard, possibly protective, shell about him that he got from heaven knows where. In another man I should have called it pride ; but what had he to be proud of ? Beverly reached through his armour, though ; somehow Beverly flicked the raw flesh. I have been able to learn something about the affair though not very much ; and what I have learned appears confused and irrational. Several very nervous young men have assured me that Francis had written an Ode on Friendship and given it to Beverly to publish in that paper of his. Beverly evidently refused ; in the *White Star* that night he was plainly heard to say that it was rubbish. It may be so ; certainly it is hard to imagine anyone inventing such a story ; but as I said before it does not make sense. When in God's name had Francis begun writing odes ? And on friendship !

We shall have to wait until Beverly returns. I have told his and Eric's parents that they may after the end of the year. Punishment of any sort I do not contemplate. What good would that do now ?

To Eleanor :

Yes, they are in Chapel Valley and apparently contented. I hope Elizabeth will find all she had

hoped to find. She loves him ; about that there can be no question. Maybe you can divine what there was about him that she loved so much. It is a constant puzzle to me. I never sought possible husbands for her but if you had asked me I should have told you she would most likely choose someone like - well, Brian's sort. Oh, you are very welcome. Adult, I mean. There is a difference between being very young and being adolescent, childish. Peter was a very simple young man ; I should say he was the most simple young man it has been my fortune to know. Now I can admire such simplicity but it is beyond me to respect it. Lord, a man should be able to take care of himself. I think Peter guessed what I thought of him privately because that night in the palace he said I must have found him easy to fool. If I had felt like talking I would have questioned his choice of words but I merely replied that I had adapted my method to the conditions I had had to meet ; which was as politely ambiguous as I could make it just then. As I say I did not feel at all like talking. I did not want to talk to anyone or do anything for a long while. You must remember how unimportant almost everything seemed to me at that time and for a long time after. I was wooden, all of me, and I moved only from long habit. I could not forget - though I tried hard - that only a few hours before I had helped Francis to a second baked potato ; and that not long after that I had heard him come down the stairs and go out while I searched the shelves in the library for something to read. I kept remembering little things like that. I kept remembering how young and harmless he had looked when Elizabeth led me into his room to see him ; the quietness and the patience of his lips under his moustache ;

the boy he had been. No, I did not feel like talking.

Peter, as I remember, did most of that. I sat in a chair by the window – I was tired – and Elizabeth stood in the centre of the room. She was still in her wraps ; she did not move from under the crystal chandelier ; she only stood like a statue, watching Peter. Her coat was opening a little at a time and slipping off her bare shoulders ; I think each time she breathed it slipped an inch or two. She waited for Peter to stop talking. To this hour I do not know what he said. Then he got up and went over to Elizabeth. He was in his shirt sleeves ; we had found him playing solitaire. He asked her what he should do. I remember his asking her that. And she said : Take me with you wherever you go. After that he talked some more, throwing out his arms a good deal. Oh, the man loved her ; I cannot doubt that he loved her. But I was watching Elizabeth ; in a way it hurt me to see her so submissive before him, she who was so proud. When he said he could live without the kingdom but would die if she left him, Elizabeth said she did not think she would die but she knew she would want to. And then he threw out his arms again and told her she had got into his head and his heart and he would never be rid of her or something like that. When he thought of her he could not think of anything else. He said he had no pride, no fear, no other desire. He said he would kill a man or beg in the streets for her. He asked her if she supposed that was love. Elizabeth said she thought there was a little more to it than that, so he told her she would have to teach him. All he knew was that he loved her and needed her. He did not even know, he said, if he should hate her father. I told him to stop talking nonsense but they paid no

attention to me. Elizabeth's coat slipped to the floor. It was a very fetching tableau I had eventually to disturb. They made me feel villainous, they were so obviously innocence and young love while I was age, wickedness and sin. I left her there with him and went down into the city where Praen was stationing his men.

I started out to ask you if you had any idea what she found so attractive about him. Women are supposed to see so much in matters of this sort that men overlook entirely. Still, I imagine no one can answer a question like that. I remember Brian's mother telling me once that she liked the way I talked and listened to other men. I have no idea what she meant. On the other hand I could never bear to sit near her if there was celery on the table.

To Eleanor :

I mentioned to Charles to-day that you and Brian had decided on a formal wedding in the cathedral. He was very much pleased. I am too. As for the Square, you can imagine what they think of it, especially the women.

I can understand why you two should wish to delay your return until the last possible moment ; have I also not been in love ? But even honeymoons should end. Come back ; Brian can make love to you in the gardens until the evenings begin to get chilly ; after that you will have the whole palace to play in. Then there are all the new things you must get for yourself ; it will not do for you to be anything but a royal bride. Something old, something new, something borrowed—— Can I tempt you back ? I have a rope of pearls for you that Brian's mother once wore. This was the only gift she ever

took from me. I gave them to her on her thirtieth birthday, a year before Brian was born. There was to be a party at my house for her and that particular night the rain fell in torrents. It fell in bucketfuls, in sheets; it dropped from an unrelenting sky like a solid wall of water. The Square was being repaved about that time and when the lightning flashed all you could see was an apparently bottomless swamp out of which the hillocks of paving material rose like islands. By ten in the evening most of the guests had arrived – only death would have kept them away – but there was no sign of the one guest I wanted to see. Finally I got on a horse and somehow reached her house; it was on Bent Lane near where Praen lives now. Will you believe it? She was in bed, reading Homer. I made her get up and dress, threw a cloak around her and hoisted her to my saddle bow. We reached my house wet to the skin and covered with mud but still alive. After we had changed into dry clothes the party began; by that time it was after midnight. But it was a good party. Lord, to think it was over thirty years ago.

I am probably mistaken but it seems to me that we who were young then knew a simpler and gayer world. Young people are so serious nowadays. I often wonder if you get the fun out of living that we got. I could tell you stories, I could sing you songs you never heard before.

Joyell was in to see me; he hopes both you and Brian will sit for him. He is getting to be an old man; he tells me yours will be his last portrait. I remember him telling me when he was painting mine that mine would be his last. We had a bottle of wine together. I have never liked artists or poets or such people but Joyell talks and acts like a gentleman.

To Eleanor :

I am past the age when my own feelings or prejudices would get involved in an answer to your very discreet question and so I could probably give you as useful advice as you are likely to get anywhere. But I do not care to ; I do not want to meddle. When I was younger heaven knows I had enough theories and very little desire to keep them secret but I forgot most of them years ago and none of them did I ever put into practice, thank God.

It is a question of what you expect, what you think or hope you are entitled to. You may tell me – you probably will, with any amount of indignation and hurt pride – that you love Brian and that he loves you, but that means nothing and it is assuredly no reason for getting married. Young men love their mistresses and young women walk proudly because they are loved and as long as they do not make public spectacles of themselves hardly anyone minds ; but when they begin to chatter about marriage they invite, the situation demands, outside interference. The clear and worldly head, shall we say, of someone who is not in love. For sensible people know that marriage is not a public avowal of love between this young man and this young woman but a notice to all the world that here is another couple who are about to found a family.

The primal urge, the first cause, is simple enough : to propagate. There may be other reasons for loving ; there is no other admissible reason for marrying. If people would only remember that. If they would only keep in mind that the only satisfactory end to all this pleasurable excitement going on within them is not an endless succession of nights together nor even – if one has talent – a

sonnet sequence, but several healthy children – I think a great deal of rather stupid trouble would be avoided.

For that, my dear Eleanor, is what it comes to. At the end you look back and you ask yourself what you have got out of twenty years of married life that you could not have got otherwise. And all you can point to is a son and daughter ; and all you have is the memory of the joy and trouble you had caring for them until they could take care of themselves. That is all, I give you my word. But you find it enough.

You will marry Brian and you will be happy for you are intelligent enough to do for the two of you. In this matter an ounce of good sense is worth a ton of passion ; and do not let anyone tell you otherwise.

Regarding your other question – how did it ever come up ? – Brian, not you, is right. Francis's middle name is, or was, Xavier.

To Brian :

I think I told you that Elizabeth and Peter stopped to see me on their way out the morning after Francis died. Or possibly I forgot. At any rate they drove to Vintners Lane in one of the palace coaches and Garth had to tell them I had spent the night at Pracn's. So they came to me there. You can imagine the scene. I was trying to eat breakfast and not succeeding very well. Elizabeth wept a little and Peter shook my hand, twice I believe. After I had asked them if they would have a cup of hot coffee and a waffle and they had declined there seemed nothing else to say but good-bye. We said that out in the snow of the carriage-way. . . . It was a cold and windy morning with the sun on the snow

dazzling enough to blind one. They were gone in a minute. The last thing I heard from their coach was young Roland's voice, assuring me that he would come back some day. Peter told him to say that, I think.

As if it mattered. Let him come back. The earth's good things belong to those who are strong enough to take and hold what they want. Strength will conquer weakness and wisdom triumph over stupidity until the world ends. If young Roland proves man enough to win back what his father lost, he can depend on me to send him, from wherever I may be, my sincerest respects. I like a man who knows what he wants and gets it.

To Eleanor :

Living goes on ; despite everything living does go on. There may be little enough joy in it and even less of hope, but somehow you rise when the day starts and you go through with it more or less as you have always gone and when night comes you try to sleep. And it is curiously hard not to believe, in those dreary half-hours before sleep finally comes, that back of all this needless pain, this senseless, stupid misery, there is not a personal and intentioned malice. It was not necessary that my son should die ! It was not needful that my daughter should go away for ever. And you think of all this and then you think of that barbaric Jahveh they sent us out of the east - and you mutter into the dark. Let me say it : I do not think God was fair.

Then sleep comes, and after sleep daylight ; and you can take things sensibly again, as Brian would say. You can deny that God had any hand in it at all.

Pride ! Yes, I am proud. Pride is my banner and when that banner falls let me die.

To Eleanor :

Happiness ? Who said anything about happiness ? You are as bad as Charles. He asked me the other day – somehow we had got to talking about God and death and heaven – if I was happy. I told him, No, of course not. He begged my pardon ; he assured me he had not been thinking of Francis and Elizabeth. I said I had not been thinking of them either. He frowned and thought this over. Then he began again : So you are not happy ?

I said : Do you think I should be ?

He waved a hand. You've got what you wanted.

I said : Should that make me happy ?

He said : Then why bother doing it ?

I shrugged. I did bother doing it but certainly not because I had thought it would make me happy. I have no idea what would make me happy. I cannot even promise – the word is getting slipperier in my hand by the minute – that happiness would be enough or that I would like it. For happiness is a word, an abstract term, like God ; none of us knows anything about it and the best we can do is talk, like beggars outside a palace.

To Eleanor :

Of course ; you are young and the young prefer to talk about one another. But when you reach my age you will find no other talk so exhilarating as talk of God and death and heaven. You accuse it of futility, as if that made an end of it. Why, futility is its life's blood and half its charm. With one man's guess as good as another's we have filled the ages

with speculation ; it has been set to music and patterned into a ritual ; men devote lifetimes to its elaboration and spired meeting-houses have been erected wherein we gather to hear those men, suitably costumed, play variations, not always strictly etymological, on what was in the beginning – I paraphrase high authority, Elcanor – a word.

I repeat : we are all beggars outside what may be a palace. It may just as possibly be a mausoleum. Some of us prefer to believe it is a palace and, shivering in the wind, to drug ourselves into a mild ecstasy with words, with talk about its furnishings, the food in its kitchens, the silk on its beds, the utter permanence of its solid walls. And some of us, no less curious but hopelessly bereft of imagination, find the façade uncommunicative and speculation unsatisfying ; and shrug and go on about doing whatever it is we want to do.

Is there a God ? Will I live after my body has died ? No one knows ; and really it does not matter. You can answer as you please and still find living profitable. It is not a question of ultimate truths – we will leave them to the priests and the philosophers – but a matter of finding a theory comfortable to the corners and twists of one's own temperament. You may prefer to believe that when you die your body will be eaten by worms but your soul will rise to God's right hand ; or you may hope that when you die you will stay dead. Each man to the truth he likes best. Why should we quarrel ?

Long ago I began my march to, as I hope, oblivion. I knew nothing nor could ever learn anything about the two most important matters which concerned me. All I had was a life to live as I chose, my own road to travel, with death at the end. This was sure, this I could depend on, the one

truth a man could shape his life by and put his trust in. Death would claim me in the end; and not I nor all the high valorous deeds I might perform nor the exceeding wickedness with which I might befoul myself, my dreams, my sufferings, my triumphs and loves and prayers – nothing of all this would figure largely when the end of all roads was reached and They came to counting up the used suns. The end was the same, always, and in the end it did not matter.

That road I have travelled and that road I am still travelling. And my banner rides high before me. I have got what I wanted. God – if there is a god – has scourged me, covered me with sorrow, but I am still alive and still unconquered. I have lived my life as I chose to live it; I have got what I set out to get; I have wrung from unspeaking and unfriendly Omnipotence exactly what I wanted and at no greater cost, I imagine, than was to be expected. What can they do to me now? The end is the same and in the end it will not matter.

Or have I drugged myself with words and is God laughing at me now?

To Eleanor :

I am very glad to know that you and Brian are returning at last. I have been lonely here, lonelier than I would care to admit. I shall have everything ready for you; when you approach the Blue Gate you will know that you are a princess.

I have forgotten most of what I wrote you in my last letter but it persists in making me uncomfortable every time I think of it. It was not, shall I say, in my best style. Forget it.

You will call me Louis, of course, just as the

others have always done. Variations on this that suggest themselves to you I count on your discretion to use appropriately. When Elizabeth came to the library that night she shut the door and then leaned against it, just outside the circle of lamplight from my table. I was reading, I remember, in Matarezzo's *Chronicles of the City of Perugia* — a grand, full-bodied history I find comparable with Herodotus — and I did not look up when she said, after a quiet moment : ' Louis——' But when she said, in a queer voice : ' Father——' I looked up.

THE END

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